

A report from the scene of the Sago Mine disaster

Lack of decent-paying jobs drives workers into West Virginia mines

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The recent deaths of 12 coal miners in Upshur County, West Virginia, exposed the hazardous working conditions that have long been a hallmark of the coal industry and a regular source of tragedy in the Appalachian coalfields. Like Hurricane Katrina and the spate of tornadoes that devastated communities throughout the Midwest last fall, the disaster in Upshur County also revealed the lack of resources, emergency funds and economic opportunity suffered by millions of Americans.

As a result of an explosion occurring January 2 in the Sago Mine, one miner was killed instantly and 11 others died of carbon monoxide poisoning after a stalled rescue effort. The sole survivor, Randal McCloy, Jr., remains comatose. All of the miners were memorialized at an official ceremony attended by more than 2,000 people Sunday in Buckhannon, only a few miles from the site of the accident.

The memorial was intended to serve as a mark of closure, not for families of the miners or the communities surrounding the Sago operation, but for the government, industry representatives and the media. On Monday, flags around the state returned to full staff, marking the end of the “official mourning period.”

The lesson of the disaster, promoted by negligent agencies and executives and parroted by the corporate media, is that mining is risky business. The none-too-subtle implication is that dangers are inherent and unpreventable, that “heroic” miners enter at their own risk, and that they are therefore personally responsible for their fate when they go into the pits, develop Black Lung disease, and get injured or killed.

The reality is that in an economically depressed area, mining is one of the few occupations offering a wage sufficient to purchase a home, send children to college and provide for a decent life. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Upshur County is currently economically “at-risk” of becoming a “distressed” county.

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a governmental agency that was set up in conjunction with the “War on Poverty” in the 1960s primarily to transition Appalachian mountain counties out of deep, pervasive and persistent poverty through economic development and development of infrastructure. The ARC county economic status is determined by three criteria: three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and the rate of poverty. A county is considered distressed if average annual income for residents is less than 67 percent of the national average, and the poverty and unemployment rates are more than one-and-a-half times the national rates. At-risk counties meet two of these three criteria.

Census data from 2004 indicates that Upshur County had an unemployment rate of 5.4 percent, but a low rate of participation in the labor force. Only 40 percent of working-age residents were active in the workforce in 2004, reflecting the high disability rate in the region due in large part to hard and hazardous labor and lack of access to medical care.

One in five residents of the county live below the poverty line; the median personal income in 2003 was \$19,412. Unemployed and underemployed workers are lured into mining as a job that pays two to three times as much as other occupations.

Many current and former mining communities in Appalachia are likely to see expansion of mining operations in the coming months and years. The price of coal shot up by 40 percent in the last two years at the same time that demand has increased as a cheaper source of energy for electrical plants than natural gas. According to a representative of International Coal Group, prices for Appalachian coal have risen by 66 percent since January 2004.

Also driving the boom is relaxed environmental regulation under the Bush administration and state officials in the coal states, including the Democratic-controlled state government in West Virginia. Industry has proposed the building of 120 new coal-fired power plants. Over the next decade and a half, demand for energy is projected by the Energy Information Administration to increase by 40 percent. The offer of wages significantly higher than the prevailing wages in Appalachia is already drawing miners back into the industry.

The regional economy revolves around resources including coal, gas, and timber—all dangerous and highly exploitative industries. Many enter these occupations only with great reluctance after exhausting every other option. The job situation surrounding the Sago Mine, like much of Appalachia, is evident in the dozen miles separating the Wal-Mart in Weston from the one in Buckhannon. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of Buckhannon residents about the relationship of the poor economy to the mine disaster.

Rosetta Smith, who holds down two full-time jobs paying \$6 an hour, described the deaths as a tragedy for the small town, particularly for relatives of the miners. While a job in the mines enables a higher standard of living, she said, “I won’t go into the mines because of how dangerous it is.”

“Around here, if you don’t have a college diploma, that is the best job there is. I work as a cook in a daycare and a cook in a nursing home. I make enough to support myself and help my grandma who is just getting Social Security,” Rosetta said. “People go to [the temporary employment agency] Manpower to find a job.”

“There are not enough windows in a mine for me to go down,” Robert Harvey said, “but we need the jobs around here. A lot of places have shut down.” Harvey, who works in construction, told the WSWS, “Around Philippi was the Badger mine, and that was closed down. Now the mines are starting to come back because coal prices are high again. The only places that pay anything are the gas rigs or the coal mines, and that is why people go to work in them.”

Becky Hinkle, who had two grandparents killed in coal mines, expressed

concern over the economic future of the town. “Everybody says, what are these miners going to do if they close the mine? There needs to be more jobs here,” she said. “Everybody is a mine person, people who drive the trucks to haul the coal, but that is all there is that pays well. Sure you can get a job in Wal-Mart, but you need two jobs in order to support yourself.”

She also criticized the lack of safeguards and inadequate rescue efforts as contributing factors in the fatalities. “We’re two hours from a major airport. We’re smack in the middle of the state. What good is having two guys that can get there in 20 minutes if the other six can’t? My son works at a nuclear power plant, and he says they have a safety crew right on the spot. I think it’s a necessity.”

David Bender, a young worker, described the low pay of the service sector. “Pretty much fast food and restaurants are the only jobs around here, unless you are willing to work on the gas rigs or in the coal mines—\$5.15 an hour sucks,” he said. “This is a nice place to live, but I have worked nine months in a doughnut shop and you can’t live on that.”

“You have got to know somebody to get a job, either that or leave the area,” said George Williams, who is employed at a body shop in Buckhannon. “The good jobs are mining or the rigs, but they are real selective on who they hire. I have been putting in applications everywhere and nobody wants to hire me.

“You can’t support a family working fast food. You can go to Wal-Mart, but that doesn’t pay anything either. Natural gas rigs or mining is all that there is around here. The mines were closed down and they have just started coming back. The people who make the money tend to run over the little people,” Williams said. “The company will put your life at danger to make money. I have a buddy who works on the gas rigs. If somebody doesn’t come in, they will make you stay a second shift. If you have to pull two 8-hour shifts, or sometimes it is two 12-hour shifts, you are so tired by the time you finish. Every job is dangerous.”

Bea Estep, whose ex-husband retired last week after 42 years in the mines, related that coal companies have left a long legacy of negligence and death. “They’re let get by with it, and they change hands often enough that—it’s just like passing the buck. You get to be my age, you see it a lot.”

Her second husband works making pellets for wood stoves at \$7.50 an hour, but is considering going back to his former job on the local gas rigs. “About the only jobs around here that pay well are the mines, timber or the gas rigs, and they are all dangerous,” she said. “My son worked at the mine but he doesn’t want to go underground; it is scary.”

“Why wait so long? Why wait until tragedy to fix these things? If you talk about what goes on at your workplace other than to your family, you’re going to lose your job. There are unsafe conditions at a lot of the construction jobs and other places, and if they can’t be corrected, they get taken offline. At the mines it goes on. The safety inspectors let them get by with almost anything. They hand them a citation, and that is it, nothing is done.

“The men are not allowed to speak out. And I’m sure a lot of them are afraid of losing their jobs. They’ve got families to support, and where are they going to go? If they’re buying homes, where are they going to go work where they can afford it?”

Bea explained that young workers have extremely limited options and that a college education was closed off to many. The average tuition at public colleges in West Virginia has shot up by nearly 10 percent each year, forcing many students out of college or into increased loan debt. Budget cuts and new restrictions by the Bush administration on the federal Pell Grant program have reduced or eliminated financial assistance for thousands of students in the state.

“We have a nice college. It’s a good college with a good name. But if you can’t afford college—then what? You know, you have to work. You might make it from day to day to day, that’s what people do. That’s really

what coal miners do, too, pay to pay.”

Nineteen-year-old Harrison Brown expressed his exasperation at the lack of options in Appalachia. “There are no jobs here. You either have to go to the woods or work in the mines. My dad has been a coal miner, and he told me he doesn’t want me to work in the mines. Most of the jobs around here pay the minimum wage, \$5.15 an hour. If you work in the woods, you make \$10 or \$11 an hour, so that is good money.

“I was working for a guy who cut lumber, he got killed last month when a tree fell on him. Any job around here that pays half good is dangerous: the woods are dangerous, the mines are dangerous and the rigs are dangerous.” He added, “If they really wanted to make them safe they could, but they are just worried about the coal to make more money and they don’t want to spend money to make them safe.

“You can earn \$17 or \$18 an hour working in a mine and that is really good money around here. You can’t do that at a restaurant, so people are going to take those jobs where they can,” Brown said. “I have been looking everywhere. I have my application in at the sawmills, but they say they are not hiring. I went to trade school for body mechanics, and I can’t get a job doing that. I have a fiancée; we’re engaged to get married, but I don’t want to get married until I have a job. I want to be able to settle down and buy a house, but you can’t do any of that without a job.”

Scott Herron, a 17-year-old, conveyed similar frustrations. “I have my application in every store and restaurant out there and can’t find any work. Mines or timber or oil are the only jobs that pay well, and you can get killed on any one of them. I started looking for work when I was 16. There is nothing in this area for us.”

Linda, who asked that her last name not be used, told the WWSWS, “I lost a brother in a nonunion mine in 1982. He was a red hat [a new hire, still under training], and he was running one of those machines that digs the coal. He wasn’t supposed to be outside the machine while it was on, but they had him checking something and he just got chewed up by it. Every bone in his body was broken. He was 21 years old.” She added that the mine was shut down briefly before being bought and reopened. “That’s the way they do it. Just open it up as something else.”

“I haven’t slept right since the explosion,” she said. “The only reason they’re in the hole is because they need money, but the owners don’t care about safety. I think we need to check out all the politicians. I get so mad when I see [US Senator] Ted Kennedy on TV. He’s so rich, what does he know about being a coal miner? Everybody’s not rich like a Kennedy.”



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