

Deregulation of coal industry behind fatal accidents in US mines

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9 March 2006

Most if not all of the deaths this year in US coal mines could have been prevented if safety measures proposed for nearly two decades had not been blocked and eventually killed by officials from the Clinton and Bush administrations.

In recent years, officials from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), under orders from the Bush White House to promote a “partnership” with the coal companies, have overturned several safety procedures in place for years and drastically reduced the enforcement of existing safety standards. In addition, government officials have not mandated the use of safety equipment widely used in other countries that has proved to save lives and prevent injuries.

To date, 21 coal miners have died on the job this year in the US. Another three miners working in metal and non-metal mines have also been killed. The most recent fatalities occurred on February 16 and 17. On the first date, 33-year-old Tim Caudill was crushed to death when a section of roof fell at the TECO coal mine near Hazard, Kentucky. On the following day, 35-year-old William Junior Miller was crushed to death between two coal cars in an underground pit in Maryland.

While the investigations into this year’s fatal mining accidents—including the Sago Mine disaster that killed 12 West Virginia miners—are still continuing, initial evidence indicates that the elimination of previously existing federal and state regulations, the suppression of additional regulations and the lack of enforcement of existing regulations all played a direct role in these tragedies.

Thirteen of the 21 fatalities in 2006 have been the result of asphyxiation after an initial fire or explosion. While it appears that one of the miners was killed instantly by the January 2 blast at the Sago Mine, it is possible that several of the other men trapped underground may have lived at least 10 hours after the initial explosion, according to notes recovered from one of them. The only survivor, Randall McCloy, Jr., was rescued after 42 hours underground but suffered severe brain damage.

Another two West Virginia miners, killed in a January 19 conveyor belt fire at the Aracoma Alma Mine, were overcome by smoke.

Respirators

Each of the 13 miners who died from asphyxiation was equipped with a respirator that provided only one hour’s worth of oxygen. On September 24, 2001, MSHA withdrew a proposal that required mine owners to stock caches of additional respirators that would give

miners more time to escape or be rescued.

Another portion of the rule change quashed by MSHA would have required more training on the use of the respirators known as Self-Contained Self-Rescuers or SCSRs. These devices are more complicated than the type of oxygen masks found in airplanes. Since pressurized oxygen containers would be an explosive hazard, SCSRs produce oxygen through a chemical reaction. Working them requires miners to perform several steps to start the chemical reaction that supplies a clean airflow.

There have been repeated incidents in which the failure to properly train miners in the use of these devices and to have sufficient supplies of the respirators had fatal consequences. In 1987, a MSHA report on the death of 27 miners in a Utah mine three years earlier found that the miners had not been properly trained in the use of the device and that there were not enough of them in places accessible to the miners.

George W. Bush’s appointee to head MSHA, David Lauriski, could not complain of being ignorant of these findings when he withdrew the proposal to mandate mine operators to provide more SCSRs. In 1984, Lauriski was the safety and training director at the Utah mine where the 27 miners were killed.

Timeline

Though the Bush administration killed the proposal for the SCSRs, the Clinton administration had simply delayed its implementation when it was in charge of MSHA until it lost office. The Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, subordinate the safety of coal miners to the profit needs of the coal industry.

It is noteworthy that the head of the MSHA under Clinton, Davitt McAteer, who helped stall the implementation of the respirator proposal, is now in charge of the Sago Mine investigation in West Virginia.

It is useful to take note of the timeline on the enactment (or non-enactment) of mine safety improvements. The terrible mine accident in Utah, killing 27 miners, occurred in 1984, under the Reagan administration. In 1987, under the Reagan administration, MSHA issued its reports and proposed that ventilation standards be revamped. The Clinton administration, which came into office in 1993, began studying changes to mine ventilation standards. In 1999, after seven years of study—virtually the entire time Clinton was in office—MSHA announced it was ready to “begin the process” of making rule changes. The proposals were then left for the next administration to

enact—a measure that virtually guaranteed they would be killed. The Bush administration, elected with the support of Big Coal, did precisely that, withdrawing the proposals in 2001.

While consideration of proposals that would save workers' lives are dragged out for years or decades, Congress has no problem expediting the passage of laws that benefit the wealthiest layers of the population. When it comes to tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent of the population, for example, there are no proposals for years of analysis on the effects of such giveaways on the economy, the federal deficit or the ability of the government to maintain social programs.

Rescue chambers

Another three proposals that in all likelihood would have saved the lives of the miners in both the Sago and Alma mines were blocked in a similar fashion. The use of refuge stations or rescue chambers has received some attention in the press. In January, 72 potash miners in Saskatchewan in western Canada survived nearly 30 hours after a fire broke out in their mine. Earlier that month, three nickel miners in Tasmania survived a fire because they found refuge in an underground chamber equipped with adequate supplies of oxygen, food and water.

MSHA officials and much of the media have suggested that refuge stations are a new and novel idea and that the United States simply needs to catch up with technological changes introduced in other countries. In fact, a report in the *Charleston Gazette* revealed that in 1969—37 years ago—Congress wrote mine and safety laws, following the 1968 Farmington mine disaster, that authorized federal officials to mandate safety chambers pending the outcome of a study.

The study, completed in 1970, found that such chambers would be beneficial and specifically refuted objections—still being made today by coal companies and their allies in government—that safety chambers could not withstand explosions or work underground. For 36 years, officials from MSHA and its predecessor knew about these findings, sat on them and never mandated their use in coal mining, despite having the explicit authority to do so.

The other two proposals that never saw the light of day involved employing advances in communications equipment to allow rescuers to communicate with and locate trapped miners. Since at least 1992, federal mine safety officials have refused to mandate the use of life lines—a rope made of fireproof material attached to the wall of a mine tunnel—that would direct miners safely even out of a smoke-filled mine if lighting had been destroyed by a fire or explosion.

Evidence indicates that the 11 miners who survived the initial explosion in the Sago mine at first tried to escape and then returned back to the coal face—in the deepest part of the mine—in order to build a barricade to preserve fresh air and await rescue. Why they did not continue toward the mine exit is still an open question, but they may have believed there was a cave-in or a fire blocking their route. Under those conditions, the miners did as they had been trained to do.

If the trapped miners had had a means of communicating with rescuers on the surface they could have told them their exact location, allowing rescue teams to reach them sooner. The miners might also have been told that there was no fire blocking their exit and that it was safe to walk out of the mine while using their respirators.

Like the rescue chambers and other safety equipment, MSHA officials claim the communication devices are still unproven. Again,

this is not true. There is adequate data proving the effectiveness and reliability of such communication devices, including their role in several mining disasters over the last 10 years, some of them in the US, where they were credited with saving miners' lives.

Conveyor belt fires

Finally, there are two additional issues that relate directly to the January 19 conveyor belt fire at the Aracoma's Alma Mine that led to the deaths of two miners. In 2001, Bush administration officials killed a proposal to test the advantages of having conveyor belts made with fire-resistant materials. Like the SCSR proposal, this came out of the Clinton administration, which studied the issue for seven years and then passed it onto the Bush government. A 1992 MSHA report noted that belt fires were shown to be the cause of 14 percent of underground mine fires between 1970 and 1990.

The second issue concerns the use of conveyor belt tunnels as both a means of carrying coal out of the mine and as a pathway to bring fresh air in. Safety experts and US law since 1969 have opposed this practice on two principal grounds: First, pushing high velocity air through a beltway can spread the flames of a belt fire and push toxic fumes directly to the face of the mine where most of the miners are working. The second objection of safety experts is that this dual usage eliminates an alternate path of escape for the miners in the event of a fire, explosion or roof cave-in.

For these reasons, the use of beltways as fresh-air intakes was restricted by MSHA, which mandated that they would only allow the double utilization of such pathways if individual mines applied for and were granted a waiver. Such an application was made by the Alma mine and approved under the Clinton administration in 2000.

For years, coal operators lobbied for MSHA to abolish the restriction altogether. Coal operators were eager to save the cost of digging the separate ventilation shaft, and they felt that the process of applying for permission on a case-by-case base was too cumbersome. In 2003, then-MSHA director Dave Lauriski proposed re-writing the standards on ventilation to allow mines to use the belt entry as a fresh air intake. The new rules were implemented in 2004.



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