

Relative of Sago miner, rescuer denounce whitewash

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During the public hearing into the Sago Mine explosion in West Virginia (See “West Virginia hearing continues cover-up of Sago Mine disaster”) Sam Lantz, brother-in-law of Marty Bennett—who was killed in the disaster—spoke to the World Socialist Web Site about the hearing and Marty’s life.

“I don’t think they are telling the truth, I think this is a cover-up and we are not going to find out what really happened. The coal operators will get off light.

“Randal McCloy stated that four of the rescuers didn’t work. I believe that he was telling the truth. The coal company and MSHA are trying to say that the miners didn’t know how to use them right. My brother-in-law had been a miner for 30 years and you can believe me that he knew how to use a self-rescuer.

“I believe Randal McCloy, yet in effect they are calling him a liar.

“They are saying that the men could have walked out, but if they didn’t have air to breathe then they couldn’t make it out. These men did what they are trained to do. They put on their self-rescuers and they tried to get out. When their way out was blocked they barricaded themselves in the mine and banged on the roof bolts waiting for an answer.

“They did what they were supposed to do, it was MSHA and the company that didn’t do what they were supposed to do.

“Why didn’t they let the doctor go up to where the miners were? Maybe some of the other men weren’t dead, maybe they were just in a comatose state and the rescuers thought they were dead. I don’t understand how one man could live and none of the other men were still alive.

“We will never know. They will never tell us the truth of what really happened down there.

“I was at the church with my sister. Folks will never know how much pain that caused us. Everyone started hollering and screaming when they were told that the miners were being brought out alive. Then three hours later we were told they wouldn’t be coming out.

“I hope some good will come out of this that will benefit other miners, that will make the mines safer and will help

the men if they get trapped.

“They passed legislation that should have been passed long ago. Had it been in effect, this could have been prevented. If the company had taken precautions then this would not have happened.

“My sister is having a real hard time. All this money they are supposed to give the families is arriving. Every time they have a bill for gas or something they have to show why they need money, like they are applying for a grant.

“I hope some truth comes out, but I don’t think it will. I think they failed those miners in many ways. I think it is all about money—as long as they can line their pockets they don’t care about the miners.

“Around here mining is the best job you can get. I work at a hospital and I don’t make half of what you make in a mine.

“Marty was a great man. He was great to my sister and he loved his family. He was a real family man. He had been diagnosed with black lung, yet he kept on working because he needed the medical insurance for my sister. He was digging coal with black lung.

“My sister can’t draw black lung benefits because on his autopsies it says that he died of carbon monoxide poisoning, not black lung.

“Marty was a great guy, he was a hard working man, he loved his son. He took my sister to all kinds of places. Now she just has to hope that she can get a lung transplant.

“Marty told us the day before Christmas that the mine was going to blow, that the gas was really bad. Marty talked a lot about the gas and the roof falls. I believe that he was scared, he wouldn’t tell me that, but that is something I believe he felt. Sometimes people do things they don’t want to because they have to.”

Other relatives gave this reporter a copy of a letter from a member of the rescue team. Below we reprint the full text of the letter, entitled, “MSHA lets mining community down.”

My name is Larry Clevenger, I started my adult life as a coal miner on November 4, 1981. On December 3, 1981, I was entrapped in a roof fall in the Stillhouse #1 mine located

in Bergoo, West Virginia. I was pinned and trapped for approximately 8 hours. I had limited movement for the first few minutes as I dug my legs free so I could move around in a small “domed” area where I was trapped with a deceased fellow worker and friend. I had this small area to wait for the brave rescuers, who at their own risk came to assist in saving us all. I am very thankful to this day of the brave men that saved me and two fellow workers, one who was critically injured. Unfortunately three of my fellow workers and friends perished in the roof collapse.

In the underground mining classes that the state made us attend for the required 80 hours of introductory “knowledge to survive,” the instructors told us if we were cut off from the escape way to barricade off and to pound on a roof bolt to signal our location. We were told to pound a few times and then listen for a response from the surface. We were told the department of mines had listening devices that could triangulate the position of the barricade. With this knowledge they could drill a hole to pump heated fresh air to keep us alive until we were rescued. MSHA went so far as to print a sticker that was required to be worn on the inside of our hard hats that was titled “when escape is cut off.” The sticker explained that if escape was cut off to barricade and listen for shots from the surface. Then pound on the roof with a firm object, every fifteen minutes until you heard a larger series of shots, which indicated that your position was located.

On January 2, 2006, some of my friends, and fellow coal miners in Sago, West Virginia, had an emergency that was quite different than the tragedy I was involved in. Instead of a roof fall these miners experienced an explosion. In my accident the rescuers could talk to me and they knew I was alive. The rescuers dug until I was free. In Sago they had hazardous gasses to contend with so the rescuers there could not simply go to the trapped miners to walk them out.

I got the chance to repay my rescuers by joining the rescue attempt at Sago when we all believed the miners were found alive. I was part of the medical team that was allowed to enter the mine to meet the miners and render any aid they may require. We were met part way in by the mantrip that brought Randal McCloy out. Dr. Blake looked at McCloy, gave advice for treatment, and then we continued on in to meet the rest of the survivors. We then were met by the next mantrip of rescuers who ordered us out of the mine. We were aware of the first dead miner but were not made aware of the deaths of the other 11 miners till after we arrived back on the surface.

The Sago miners had beat a couple of roof bolts almost unrecognizable with a sledgehammer. I am told the listening devices were not even brought to Sago. I know how scared I was when I was trapped. I can also remember how scared I

was at another near accident while escaping from a belt fire, which was similar to the accident which recently claimed the lives of the two miners at the Logan County mine. I get upset to think of those guys pounding on the roof bolts, and writing their last goodbyes to their families as they listened for replies and awaited help. The men did not get that reply they hoped for. They only had the empty quiet and cold darkness. I feel these men were wrongfully let down by MSHA.

Due to the tragedy at Sago, lawmakers suggested new laws that require tracking devices to locate our miners in the event of an accident. I admit this is one of the best ideas I have ever heard, and the cost of such equipment should not be of major importance due to the ability to save human lives. However, if they had used the technology that is at least 20 years old, the rescue teams on the surface could have heard the pounding and would have known that the trapped miners were alive. But this opportunity to communicate in time to be of help was not even brought to the site to be utilized. During the time that MSHA would not let would be rescuers enter the mine due to hazardous conditions, they could have been two miles from the entrance using the sounding devices to locate the trapped miners and been in no danger whatsoever. After locating the miners, they could have precisely drilled the hole from the safety of the surface to the miners providing them with the basic necessities for survival. Had this available technology been utilized at Sago, I feel the newspaper headlines would have had a lot better headings.

I feel anyone who has or still works in a coal mine, should be terribly upset over the failure to use the available technology at the Sago disaster. If we could get fined for not having the required MSHA sticker in our hard hats, what should MSHA be fined for not utilizing and following their own rules and guidelines? Are they above their own rules?



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