

The Utah mine disaster: A tragic consequence of government-industry collusion

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The Utah mine disaster, which has left six miners trapped 1,500 feet below ground, is but the latest tragic result of the collusion between the US government and the American mining industry. The health and safety of miners are wantonly sacrificed to boost the profits of the coal companies.

Forty six miners were killed in job-related accidents last year and ten have died so far this year.

The Utah miners were trapped below ground at the Crandall Canyon Mine when the mine collapsed some 3.4 miles from the portal in the early morning hours of August 6. The US Geological Survey reported that an earthquake of 3.9 magnitude rocked the region shortly before 3 a.m. Monday, local time. However, scientists at the University of Utah Seismograph Stations said they believed the recorded movement in the area was not a quake, but rather was “consistent with a mine-type collapse.” Since the mid-1990s, at least half a dozen other mine collapses have caused similar seismic waves.

Following angry assertions by the mine ownership that the cave-in was caused by an earthquake, the director of the University of Utah Seismograph Stations said he and his colleagues would “have to go back and look at more careful analyses” to confirm their analysis of the event.

Despite intensive rescue efforts, little progress has been made toward reaching the miners and there has been no communication from them, making the chances of rescuing the men alive increasingly remote.

Mine executives and federal safety officials say it will take at least three days to reach the miners, due to dangerous and unstable conditions in the mine.

The mine is located in a remote and sparsely populated area some 140 miles south of Salt Lake City. It is situated on public land—built into a mountain in the Manti-La Sal National Forest—a fact that in itself points to the politically incestuous relationship between the mine owners, federal oversight agencies and the political establishment as a whole.

The families of the miners have gathered in the nearby town of Huntington to seek mutual support while they maintain a grim watch—a scene that has been played out again and again in the US coalfields. Some 19 months after the Sago Mine tragedy in West Virginia that took the lives of 12 miners, many of the

glaring safety faults exposed in that disaster are once again raised: the absence of emergency communications equipment, the lack of adequate escape provisions, the refusal of the owners to equip miners with adequate emergency oxygen supplies, and the ad hoc and insufficient system for mobilizing rescue teams.

After the Sago disaster there was a flurry of official concern over mine safety, with hearings, investigations and the passage of the MINER Act mandating some small improvements. But the provisions of that act have been largely ignored and little has changed. The National Mining Association, for example, has sued the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) to block the implementation of a new rule requiring mine operators to provide their workers with additional oxygen for use in emergencies.

The Crandall Canyon Mine is half-owned by UtahAmerican Energy, a subsidiary of Murray Energy Corporation. UtahAmerican Energy operates the mine. Cleveland-based Murray Energy is the largest independent, family-held coal producer in the US. It operates four mines in Utah with 700 employees, and eleven mines nationally.

The Crandall Canyon Mine, a small operation employing 71 workers, has been issued 325 citations by MSHA for safety violations since January 2004. The ownership has been ordered to pay nearly \$152,000 in penalties. The Associated Press reported last month that mine inspectors cited the mine for violating federal rules requiring that at least two separate passageways be designated for escape in an emergency. This was the third time in less than two years that the mine had been cited for that problem.

The founder, chairman, president and CEO of Murray Energy is Robert Murray, a major donor to the Republican Party who is well connected to the Bush administration and the Republican congressional leadership. At an extraordinary press conference held at the mine site Tuesday, Murray gave vent to the despotic outlook prevalent among mine owners. Evidently, no section of the mass media had any qualms about allowing the mine boss to serve as the primary source of information to the public on the reasons for the cave-in and the state of the rescue operation.

Standing alongside Murray was Al Davis, the chief MSHA official for the region. The participation of Davis in a joint

press conference with the mine owner was itself indicative of the real relationship between the industry and the federal agency nominally mandated to police it. The collusion has reached the point where even the pretense of government independence and oversight is barely maintained.

In a self-serving and semi-hysterical rant, Murray began by declaring that “The United States is a great country,” and proceeded to denounce government measures to control global warming and reduce green house gasses as an attack on the American people.

He asserted repeatedly that the cause of the cave-in was an earthquake, a “natural disaster” for which he had no responsibility. “This was an earthquake,” he bellowed. “It had nothing to do with our mining activity. All mining activities at the Crandall Canyon Mine were in accordance with all laws and mining regulations and a mining plan approved by federal regulatory agencies.”

Murray launched into an attack on the press for supposedly spreading false information. At one point he demanded that a media helicopter circling overhead be ordered away, and reacted to vehicle traffic in the area with the command, “Sheriff, stop everybody until I’m done.” Reflecting the typical relationship between local government and police and the coal bosses, the sheriff could be heard snapping, “Will do!”

Murray then denounced widespread media reports that the cave-in was related to so-called “retreat mining,” a dangerous procedure whereby miners remove coal from coal pillars that support the mine roof in sections about to be closed, precipitating the collapse of the roof. There was no retreat mining, Murray declared, but only “primary mining.”

He singled out for attack the Associated Press and Fox News and denounced by name David McAteer, a former MSHA official and vocal critic of mine safety, United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President Cecil Roberts, and others. The term “retreat mining” was being used, he said, only because of “lackeys” from the UMWA who want to organize his workers and “want to damage Murray Energy, UtahAmerican and the United States coal industry for their own motives.”

Following this harangue, Davis attempted to distance himself from Murray’s claims and accusations, saying MSHA had made no determination of the cause of the cave-in and had not even begun its investigation. However, when he attempted to discuss the progress of the rescue effort he was repeatedly interrupted by Murray and relegated to the background.

Even the CNN anchors and commentators, who earn their salaries by dispensing the vetted pro-corporate pabulum that passes for news, were taken aback. The news anchor described the press conference as “bizarre.”

As for Cecil Roberts and the UMWA, the union bureaucracy has played a pivotal role in the destruction of conditions in the mines. Decades of betrayals of miners’ struggles and collaboration with the owners have led to collapse in union membership and the proliferation of non-union operations such

as those owned by Murray. Moreover, the alliance of the UMWA with the Democratic Party and the union’s opposition to an independent political movement of the working class has blocked any means for miners to end the collaboration of the mine owners and the government in the dismantling of health and safety provisions.

MSHA, which was established in 1977, has exerted less and less enforcement of safety laws or oversight of the coal industry, its powers progressively diminished under both Republican and Democratic administrations. However, with the advent of the current Bush administration, it has been turned into little more than an adjunct of the coal bosses.

Many of the mandates enacted by Congress in the 1977 Mine Act that established MSHA have been weakened or eliminated. These include a prohibition on using belt-air to ventilate working areas and a requirement for explosion-proof seals to separate working areas of a mine from abandoned areas, measures critical to preventing the buildup of noxious or explosive gases in underground mines.

The Government Accountability Office issued a report in 2003 on MSHA which found that of all the citations issued by the agency, including those deemed “significant or substantial,” MSHA failed to follow up by the deadline set by inspectors to see if the hazards had been corrected in 48 percent of the cases.

Even as the number of inspectors has been slashed, MSHA has adopted a policy of “compliance assistance” with the mine owners, instead of enforcement. Bush’s first appointee to head MSHA, David Lauriski, had served as general manager for the Energy West Mining Co. in Huntington, Utah and director of health, safety and environmental affairs at Interwest Mining in Salt Lake City.

Earlier this year, MSHA issued new guidelines for what constitutes a mine-related fatality, narrowing the scope of what MSHA defines as a fatal accident, chargeable to the mine operator.



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