

US federal officials cover up deadly conditions in Utah mine

Jerry White
17 August 2007

Eleven days since the August 6 cave-in at the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah, families and friends of the six trapped coal miners are continuing their vigil although there has been no contact with the men and it is unlikely that they will be found alive. Because of the instability of the mine and further cave-ins, rescuers have cut through less than half of the fallen rock and coal in the path to where the miners are believed to be. At this pace, it would take nearly two weeks to reach them.

In an all-too-familiar scene in coal communities, from the western US states to Appalachia, hundreds of people from the surrounding small towns of Huntington, Cleveland, Helper, Price and Orangeville have joined the rescue effort, held fundraisers for “Our Six” and rallied to support the families of the victims. Among those involved in these efforts are survivors of the 1984 fire at the nearby Wilberg Mine, which claimed the lives of 27 miners. One of the trapped miners in Crandall Canyon, 24-year-old Brandon Phillips, who had been on the job just three weeks before the mine collapsed, lost an uncle in the Wilberg fire, the worst mine disaster in Utah history.

The current tragedy has been felt as far away as Mexico, where two of the trapped men—Jose Luis Hernandez, 23, and Juan Carlos Payan, 22—recently left families behind in order to seek higher wages in Utah’s mines. Expressions of sympathy and solidarity have arrived from many quarters, including from the families of the 12 miners who perished in the Sago Mine disaster in January 2006.

This outpouring by ordinary working people contrasts with the self-serving efforts by the mine’s owner, top officials from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the national news media, who have sought to conceal the real reasons for this disaster and scores of others that have claimed the lives of at least 60 miners over the last 19 months. As in other recent cases, there were ample warnings of an impending catastrophe, which were ignored by company management and government officials in charge of regulating the industry.

Despite the well-publicized promises by Democratic and Republican politicians after the Sago disaster, no serious safety improvements have been made, and the technology to locate and rescue trapped miners continues to be outmoded. Searchers have been forced to rely on the time-consuming task of drilling 1,500-foot boreholes from the surface of the mine, in what part-owner Robert E. Murray, chairman of Murray Energy Corp. of Cleveland, Ohio, admits is a “trial-and-error” approach to finding the miners, whose exact location is not known. To listen for any movement, rescuers are using “geo-phones”—a 26-year-old audio technology that “has never located a trapped miner,” according to a memo written by MSHA head Richard Stickler.

Due to opposition by the mining industry, the legislation passed by Congress last year gave the mine owners until 2009 to develop and install wireless communication systems. Had these been in effect at the Crandall Canyon Mine, if the men had survived the initial cave-in they would have been able to radio rescuers and relay their exact location, allowing searchers to take the most efficient route to save them.

In the place of any serious examination of the causes of this and other tragedies, a platform has been given to Crandall Canyon Mine’s co-owner, Robert Murray, who has used the media to conduct a tightly scripted public relations campaign to detract attention from the unsafe conditions at the mine. Adopting the mantle of a paternalistic employer who has no other interests than protecting “his miners,” Murray has donned a miner’s helmet, conducted daily press conferences and taken television crews underground to view the progress of the safety operation.

From the beginning, Murray has set out to provide himself with an alibi. First, he claimed that an earthquake had caused the mine collapse, despite scientific evidence showing that the cave-in itself was responsible for the seismic activity recorded by geologists. He then denied that his company was engaged in the dangerous practice of “retreat mining,” in which coal pillars holding up the roof of a mine are removed, leading to intentional roof collapses. This, too, was proven false.

Despite these lies—and Murray’s well-known record of operating unsafe mines in other states, his vocal opposition to safety and environmental regulations and his close ties to the Bush administration—no one in the media has challenged Murray or questioned why he should be allowed to set the tone for the coverage of this event.

It is clear the methods employed at the mine and approved by federal mine safety officials were inherently unsafe, and that these methods are widely used in other mines, particularly in Utah and other western states.

While Murray initially denied that retreat mining was being used, MSHA officials said that the technique was used in the mine. Documents show that on June 15, MSHA district manager Allyn Davis accepted a “roof control amendment,” permitting retreat mining along the southern tunnels where the trapped men were working.

In order to extract the last amounts of coal from the mine, which was nearing the end of its life, the company was cutting out coal pillars that were holding up a massive amount of rock above the main tunnels. Because huge sections on either side of the tunnels had already been mined by longwall machines and had collapsed, these thick coal pillars were the only support for the main tunnels for the mountain that rises as much as 2,200 feet.

During retreat mining, the removal or reducing in size of the coal pillars produces seismic jolts, “bumps” or “bounces” caused by the compression of coal pillars under the massive weight of the rock above. In recent weeks, several miners, including one of the trapped men, 41-year-old veteran miner Manuel Sanchez, had expressed concern about working in the deepest areas of the mine—Belt 7—because the floors had been “heaving” or buckling up from intense pressure. Workers said supervisors at the mine knew of the problem.

According to the *New York Times*, mining engineers consider 1,800 feet to be the depth where coal reaches its maximum load-bearing capacity. However, the paper wrote, “Over the last two decades, mines in Utah and in some other coal-producing areas have pushed past depths of 1,500 feet, which has been considered an impassible barrier with older technologies.

(Appalachian coal mines are typically much shallower than those in the West.)”

Miners in 7 of Utah’s 10 mines, including Crandall Canyon, are forced to work in depths of 1,600 to 2,000 feet. An eighth mine is expected to push through 1,800 feet in the next few years. Relu Burlacu, a seismologist at the University of Utah, told the *Times*, “With depth, the overburden increases. And when the overburden is bigger, the stress is bigger.”

These other facts have also emerged:

* A memo obtained by the *Salt Lake Tribune* showed operators at the mine entirely abandoned work in an area about 900 feet from where six miners were trapped because of “serious structural problems” in March. The memo shows that mine owners were trying to work around poor roof conditions before halting mining of the northern tunnels in early March after a “large bump occurred...resulting in heavy damage” in those tunnels.

The memo, prepared by Agapito, a Colorado engineering company contracted by the operators, indicates the owners “knew the tremendous pressures of the mountain bearing down on the mine were creating problems with the roof,” according to the *Tribune*, “and they were searching for a way to safely keep the mine from falling in as they cut away the coal pillars supporting the structure.”

Robert Murray, part owner of the mine, told the *Tribune* he was not aware of any prior roof concerns. “It’s the first time I’ve heard of this,” he said of the March incident.

The March bump did enormous damage to nearly 800 feet in the Crandall mine, leading the company to shut down operations in that area. Such events are supposed to be reported to the MSHA, but public data shows the last reported roof fall was in 1998, according to the *Tribune*.

* While acknowledging the March incident, Richard Stickler, the head of the MSHA, said it occurred in an area hundreds of feet away, suggesting that it was not a serious concern. However, mine safety experts say such severely unstable roof conditions would not be limited to a single area of the mine. In a mine that stretches for miles, conditions in both areas would be “nearly identical,” according to Robert Ferriter, director of the mine safety program at the Colorado School of Mines and a 27-year MSHA veteran.

“If you had problems up there on the north side, I would expect you would have the same problem on the south side,” Ferriter told the *Tribune*. The damage from the cave-in stretched hundreds of yards, with rubble blocking entries more than half a mile away and numerous additional bumps making rescue work unsafe.

After the March event, operators decided to abandon mining in the northern tunnels. However, Agapito determined the southernmost main tunnels could be mined if larger pillars were used to support the roof. It is not clear if the wider pillars were being used. “Our mining plan, when it was recommended by Agapito, was approved by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration,” and those who question it are “incorrect,” Murray said.

During a review of the company’s proposal in late May, inspectors found some problems, MSHA coal administrator Kevin Stricklin told the *Charleston Gazette* last week, but they were “corrected” and the plan was approved.

Safety experts question how the MSHA could have approved such a plan. Tony Oppegard, a former senior advisor at the MSHA and Kentucky mining regulator, told the *Tribune* the approval raised questions about the reliability of the MSHA. “Everyone understands that in the West you have tremendous pressure on those coal pillars from the overburden and they are subject to bursting or bursting of the ribs,” Oppegard said. “In either case, that can be deadly for coal miners.”

“I’m surprised that they would try to take that last section,” Ferriter said. “I would’ve thought that would have triggered someone from

MSHA to say, ‘Wait a minute, let’s take a look at this.’ ” He continued, “What is MSHA doing in all this? They’re the ones who are supposed to catch this sort of thing.”

The decision by top MSHA officials to turn a blind eye to safety conditions was at the center of several mine disasters last year, including those at the Sago, Aracoma and Darby mines that killed 19 miners. After this was publicly exposed, Stickler wrote a memo to MSHA employees decrying “deeply disturbing” problems in its enforcement program. Stickler created an Office of Accountability to oversee management and enforcement programs in the agency, whose top positions have not been filled.

Like many of the top officials in the MSHA appointed by the Bush administration, Stickler is a former mine boss who has long advocated the self-regulation of the industry by the coal operators and blocked any significant improvements that would cut into the profits of the coal bosses. In return, the coal industry, including Crandall Canyon Mine owner Murray, have poured in vast amounts to fund the reelection campaign of Republican Party politicians, including Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, who is married to Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, whose agency oversees mine safety.

The tragic conditions facing miners today are the product of the unrelenting drive by the energy giants to slash jobs, cut labor costs and boost productivity—a process that has led to a 20 percent drop in real wages for miners since 1984, ever-more-deadly working conditions and widespread poverty in coal mining areas across the country. It is also the product of the impotency and failure of the United Mine Workers union (UMW), whose pro-business collaboration with the coal companies and the Democratic Party has produced a catastrophe for miners and their families.

In the face of clear evidence of criminal negligence, a serious investigation must be carried out into the causes of the Crandall Canyon disaster. This must be conducted independently of the MSHA, the two big business parties and the UMW—who in one way or another are beholden to the profit interests of Big Coal.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact