

Utah mine to be sealed, entombing missing miners

Samuel Davidson
24 August 2007

The *Washington Post* reported Thursday that mine owner Bob Murray had decided to end production at the Crandall Canyon Mine in central Utah where six coal miners were trapped in an August 6 cave-in and to seal the mine.

Murray had previously said mining would resume after sealing the area where the miners were trapped. This provoked angry protests by relatives and friends who argued that if the mine was safe enough to resume production, it was safe enough for rescuers to continue the search for their loved ones.

In an interview with the *Post*, Murray said the entire mine would be sealed after federal safety officials brought the rescue operation to an official close. Efforts to reach the men through a horizontal tunnel were ended after a second deadly cave-in August 16 killed three rescue workers and wounded another six.

According to Murray, the day after the second accident he told Richard Stickler, the head of the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), that he was submitting a plan to seal this mine because the “mountain is alive.”

“I saw the devastation in there, and I told the families privately that there was no way their loved ones could have survived the shock 10,000 times stronger than what we saw Thursday night [August 16],” Murray said. “They didn’t like to hear it. I tried to say it with as much compassion as I can. I don’t think I was very good at it at all.

Murray’s initial rush to resume production and his callous disregard for the families of the trapped men apparently caught MSHA officials off guard, too. “We were shocked that the subject was even brought up,” a spokesman from the agency told the *New York Times* Tuesday. “MSHA remains 100 percent focused on the rescue effort.”

From the beginning of the disaster, Murray has attempted to pose as a friend of the miners and deflect attention from the dangerous conditions in the mine. In his interview with the *Post*, he reiterated his claim that the August 6 collapse was caused by an earthquake, a claim that has been repudiated by seismologists. In fact, the mine had been plagued by instability due to the massive weight of the mountain above, whose foundations had been undermined by miles of tunnels.

Murray also denied his company was engaged in retreat mining—a dangerous practice in which operators remove coal pillars holding up the roof of a mine in order to extract the last remaining coal before a mine is abandoned. The release of mining plans submitted by the company to the MSHA proved that this assertion was a lie, too.

Murray once again insisted that there was “no inkling” of trouble in the mine before the August 6 collapse. He told the *Post* this despite the fact that the company had been forced to abandon mining in the northern section of the mine last March, after mine collapses in the area. Regarding a memo from an engineering contractor on the instability of the mine, Murray said, “I have no knowledge of it, no recollection, I depended on our people there. In fact they told me in the last two months things were better than they’ve ever been.”

Prior to Murray’s takeover, records show that massive underground sections to the north and south of the main tunnel had been long-walled while a barrier of coal was left to support the roof of the main tunnel. An article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on Tuesday reported that records on file with both the MSHA and the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining show that Andalex Resources—the previous owners—had decided not to mine these coal barriers because it posed a risk to

miners.

The *Tribune* report found that less than three months after Murray's company bought a 50 percent ownership in the mine in August 2006, they petitioned the MSHA for permission to begin mining those barriers. On November 11, 2006, MSHA officials approved the mining in the north barrier. Murray also told reporters his company had not changed its mining plan since taking over the mine from its previous owners in 2006.

In May, the company asked the MSHA for approval to begin cutting away support pillars on the south end. The MSHA approved the plan on June 15. It is in this section that the six miners were working when they were trapped after another massive cave-in.

Relatives and friends have argued that sealing the mine would make it impossible to determine whether the men survived the initial mine collapse and died because of the lack of air, water and food. It would also serve to destroy evidence of safety violations and criminal negligence. Finally, sealing the mine would also help whitewash the role of the MSHA, which approved Murray's mining plan.

These factors were certainly weighed against the potential profits that could be made from resuming production, an idea Murray first floated Monday, the same day a memorial service was held for one of the three rescue workers. Speaking to reporters outside the mine, Murray said, "We would abandon any effort to mine [where the miners were trapped], but the reserves are in an entirely different place."

It is not out of the question that Murray may at some time in the future seek to access these reserves from another direction and simply rename the mine. This is exactly what Murray did in his southeastern Ohio mine so he would not have to rehire laid-off unionized miners.

Sonny Olsen, a Price, Utah, attorney who is acting as a spokesman for the families of the trapped men said that they were all upset by Murray's statements and demanded that he live up to his earlier promises to bring the men out whether they are dead or alive.

Anger mounted Tuesday during a funeral service held for another rescue worker. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported that at the service a friend of one of the trapped miners went up to Murray and handed him a dollar bill and said, "This is just to help you out so you

don't kill him."

The *Tribune* reported that Murray snapped his head back as if he had been assaulted by the man. He tried to give the dollar back and threw it on the ground when the man refused to take it, saying, "I'll tell you what, son, you need to find out about the Lord."

The blatant deception and ruthlessness of this particular mine owner is not uncharacteristic of many of those who inhabit the top echelons of corporate America, who believe that just about anything is acceptable when it comes to making a profit. In the mining industry, such views have been encouraged by the betrayal and collapse of the United Mine Workers union (UMW), which now represents fewer than a third of all coal miners, and the pro-business policies of both the Democratic and Republican parties, which have systematically dismantled safety and environmental regulations, while in return receiving millions in campaign contributions from mine owners like Murray, a major Republican donor.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact