

# West Virginia workers speak on mine disaster

Andre Damon, Samuel Davidson  
9 April 2010

Miners, their family members and neighbors spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the conditions that led to Monday's deadly explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia.

Tom, 52, a disabled worker who lives down the road from the Upper Big Branch mine, spoke of how Massey Energy Company controls the lives of the people in the area. "I grew up here," he said, "and when we were kids we used to go and play on that mountain. Now it is all private property. If you go up there they want to arrest you for trespassing.

"Massey owns everything around here. People are afraid to say anything against Massey. Massey has guards who ride up and down here and threaten everyone. Even the state police are guards for Massey. They want to control everything.

"Just since we have been talking here, that same state trooper has ridden up and down three times. In a few minutes he will be back again.

"It is worse now than in the 1930s. My grandfather told me about the mine wars. He was up on Blair Mountain. He said they would bring in scabs by the boxcar and take them out by the flatcar. They finally starved those miners out.

"It's like that again. You either do what the company wants or you don't have a job.

"That portal has not been open very long. Massey built that portal so it would be closer to the mine face. They didn't want the miners spending so much time getting to and from the face. I know they ran that entrance through several old mines. That is probably what caused the explosion.

"There is an old mine there that hasn't been worked since 1951, it would have filled up with gas. I don't know for sure, but I bet that Massey cutting through it is what caused this to happen.

"The inspectors don't mean anything. With big coal, they do what they want. What do a few violations and

finances mean to them? It's all big money. They pay someone off and they don't have to pay any fines.

"If you complain about safety, you get fired. If you complain about anything, you get fired. I had a friend who developed lupus. They fired him. Miners are supposed to have good health benefits, but what good is it if when you get sick, they fire you?

"You don't have the union around here. Most of these mines are nonunion now. It doesn't matter if a miner is union or nonunion, the company does what it wants. The union doesn't fight for the men anymore."

Tom's friend, David Fitzwater, joined the conversation. He works for a contractor who has serviced several mines in the area. Fitzwater spoke about the lack of power the inspectors have and what happens when an inspector does try to stand up against the company.

"The laws don't allow the inspectors to shut the mines down," he said. "There are some good inspectors, but the company will complain and they will end up getting transferred. What is a small fine to Massey going to do, when they get a million dollars for every train they fill and they sometimes fill 5 or 6 trains a day?

"Miners don't have any rights. You either do it or you get fired. If you don't get fired, they will have you doing such backbreaking work that you end up quitting.

"Mining is the only job around here that pays anything. I mean, there are little jobs in the grocery store. But if you have a family, a wife, children, a home and car to pay for—then you have to go work in the mine.

"And the thing is, you have to work 12 hours a day, six days a week, and then you can't enjoy the things you have.

"It is a shame what happened there. We used to play ball together. There are not many of those miners that got killed who are over 30. Most of them were young. They take these jobs because it is all there is around here, and this is what happens. The sad thing is, if they open that mine back up, people will be lining up to take those jobs.

“There has to be someone that will be the voice for the miners.”

Mickey Daniels has been a miner for 6 years. He and his wife were sitting in their car in the parking lot of the local grocery store when we spoke with them.

Daniels, despite his young age, spoke like an old-timer. He had already worked in three mines. “Around here,” he said, “if you want to make any money, you have to be a coal miner. Me, I love it. I know it would be a lot safer to work in one of those strip mines, but I have been a hunter all my life and I hate what they are doing to the mountains.

“I love being a coal miner. My dad and brother are miners too. But things like this make you wonder if what you are doing is right.

“I hate Massey. I worked for them for a little while. They don’t care about the miners, all they care about is production.

“The company has known about the air problem for two weeks. They should have fixed it rather than letting those men get killed. This is a gaseous seam. All the mines around here have problems with gas.

“Every miner is supposed to have a little device, about the size of a cell phone. It reads the level of methane. When it gets to 1 percent, it sounds an alarm and you are supposed to stop mining until the problem is resolved.

“One of the problems is that the new miners are not given enough training. You are a red hat for 6 months, or 108 shifts. That is not long enough. I worked my entire 6 months and never saw the face of the mine. Then, when I got my black hat, they told me to run a buggy. I had never seen a buggy before, let alone knew how to run one. But by the end of the shift I had learned.

“They have 18-year-old kids working in the mines with a black hat. They are putting kids who have not worked in a mine for a year and have them running a miner. They need more training, more experience. The bosses, they don’t really know what is going on either. The company doesn’t care, as long as they are making their money.”

Mickey’s wife, Megan, spoke about her fears. “I had two uncles killed in the mines,” she said. “One suffocated, the other had his head cut off. Everybody in my family works in the mine.

“We have young children. But what are you going to do? There are no jobs around here. If you are not a lawyer or a doctor or something, this is the only way that you can make any money.”

Fred Lowe, 60, had worked 10 years as a coal miner before taking a job drilling oil and gas wells. He is now retired. “I feel very sorry for those families,” he said. “When I was in the coal mines it had to be safe or we wouldn’t work. Now the company gets away with just about anything.

“When I started, we were making \$16 a day. That was rough, but it was good work. It was a living. Massey, they are trying to mine coal too fast, they are not looking out for the men. They put money before everything.”

“I am the wife, daughter and sister of a coal miner,” said a woman who did not want to give her name. She and her husband knew many of the miners and had been with the families of the miners who were killed. “The thing that I want,” she said, “is for people all over the United States and all over the world to care for the miners who were killed here. I care about the miners who are killed in China. We are all in the same situation.”

She described what happened when Don Blankenship, the CEO of Massey Energy, tried to speak with the families of the miners. “I was standing there and I just turned and there he was, standing next to me as close as me and you. I don’t know what you folks were being told, but we had just been told that five more bodies had been found and they were dead.

“He was standing there and he starts walking up to the front. Well, when everybody saw him, they started getting very angry and upset. He never said he was sorry, he never said anything. The state police had to get him out of there or he would have gotten hurt.

“It’s P1—S2 for them: production first, safety second.”



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