

WSWS verifies Massey's threat to fire miners who took off work to attend funerals

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Coverage in the *World Socialist Web Site* of the April 5 disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia, which killed 29 miners, has aroused considerable interest and even controversy.

On April 12, in an article on the first funerals held for the dead workers, the WSWS explained that miners told our reporters that Massey Energy had refused to allow miners at the company time off to attend the funerals of their co-workers.

The article reported further: "Massey Energy told employees that if they miss work to attend the funerals they would be fired, workers said. A Massey worker from another mine, who did not give his name because he is afraid of losing his job, said that his coworkers were outraged that they were not given time off to mourn their friends and brothers." (See "Families begin to bury 29 killed in West Virginia explosion")

Revealing that the tragic episode in West Virginia has evoked deep feelings in the American population, the WSWS article was widely circulated and reposted or linked on the Internet. Many readers expressed outrage over Massey's blatant disregard for safety that led to the disaster, as well as the refusal of the giant company to give their employees time off to mourn. Some commentators were especially shocked at Massey's threat to fire an employee if he or she did attend a funeral, and even questioned whether such a report could possibly be true.

Although we were quite confident in the story, based on the comments of miners, the WSWS has sought to confirm our report. As part of that effort, we have attempted to speak with Massey Energy officials, without success.

On April 15, Massey did issue a press release denying another news report that the company was meeting with families of the dead miners, offering them benefits in exchange for settling legal claims. While the statement asserts the company is not requiring anyone "to agree to any settlement" to receive the benefits, it made clear that Massey's aim is to settle with miners' families without involving "personal injury lawyers."

It appears that Massey may have hired a public relations or law firm to communicate with both families and the media. When anyone now dials the main telephone number listed on

Massey's web site, the switchboard operator gives him or her another number to call. This reporter left several messages on both Monday and Tuesday, but no one has responded.

On the part of miners and their families, there seems to be no question about the truth of the WSWS report. Those we spoke to—who did not want to be identified, for fear of victimization—confirmed that Massey would not allow miners at its other mines time off to attend the funerals. Surviving miners from the Upper Big Branch (UBB) mine have been assigned to work in some of Massey's other operations in the area.

One young Massey miner, who initially worked at the UBB mine, but currently works at another company operation, explained to the WSWS that the miners had first been told that Massey would allow them to have the day off to attend funerals, but then were told they wouldn't be given the time. "I knew a lot of men that worked in that mine. I knew a lot of those who were killed. They were the people that taught me how to be a coal miner.

"I wanted to go to one of their funerals. At first Massey said that we could go, but then they said that we couldn't. They told us 'we've got to run coal today.'"

Another unemployed miner confirmed that his neighbor, a Massey miner whose uncle was killed in the explosion, was told that he would be fired if he took off to go to the funeral. "This is no surprise to me," he said. "This is how Massey treats its miners." Every day, he said, a miner is told to do things that the company knows is not safe, or "Get your bucket and get out."

Another reader who has lived in the area for years, wrote "This decision of Massey to NOT let miners take time off is a really big deal around here."

One reason why the WSWS reported Massey's policy on time off for the funerals, and other media outlets did not, is because our reporters actually *spoke to* miners and communicated what they had to say. Moreover, as opposed to the establishment media, we report the truth. (For a contrast, read the *Charleston [West Virginia] Daily Mail's* sycophantic interview with Massey CEO Don Blankenship, which essentially offers him a platform to boast about the company's generosity toward the dead miners' families.)

In any event, no one familiar with Massey's *modus operandi*

could be shocked that company officials took such an inhuman position.

The Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal had amassed more than 600 safety citations in the 18 months prior to the April 5 disaster. Many of these violations involved improper ventilation, violations of escape plans, and unsafe build-up of coal dust. Safety inspectors had found safety so poor that they ordered miners out of the mine, or parts of the mine, 54 times in 2009, an average of more than once a week, and another seven times so far this year.

Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) officials never attempted to place the mine on the “pattern of violations” list, which would have meant stronger enforcement. In fact, a loophole written into the rules under the Bush administration, but left intact by the Obama administration, allows the company to appeal its citations to avoid paying fines or being considered as having established a “pattern of violations.”

“All the company does is appeal the violations,” said one miner. “When you do get an inspector who is very tough and demands the company fixes things, he gets transferred out of here.”

Miners and others painted a picture of a company that operates without the slightest regard for its workers, or the people who live in the community. All those we spoke to expressed concern that Massey would retaliate against them or against their relatives for going on record against the company.

The eight-hour day no longer exists at Massey. Workers’ normal shifts are 10 and 12 hours, and it is not uncommon for miners to be forced to work longer—if you refuse, you will be fired. “We are heading back to the portal, it is already the end of our shift, and the boss will stop us and say there has been a rock fall that needs cleaned up. You just had the roof collapse and they make you clean it up, without any roof support or anything,” said one miner.

“Several times,” said a young Massey miner who used to work at the UBB mine. “They made us work 16-hour and 18-hour shifts. One time, the belt was covered with coal and we had to get the coal out of the mine. So they just said that you had to work until the belt was clean.”

A couple who live near the UBB mine said that every day after work they can see two or three cars parked on the side of the road with miners sleeping in them, “They’re just too tired to drive home.” There are often accidents on the road, they said, for the same reason.

Miners also reported that Massey routinely overrides gas warning devices and ignores alarms when they do go off. “I’ve seen machines where the sniffers have been bridged,” said one miner. (A sniffer is a device that samples the air for methane and will shut a machine down if it finds too much. Bridging it means the device has been bypassed.) “And others that have had a bag put over them.”

Another miner described how his crew’s spotters, devices miners carry to detect methane, all went off one time when they

got out of the elevator, but were told to turn them off, so ‘they don’t bother you.’ Behind each of these violations was the threat that a miner would be fired if he didn’t go along with the company.

Another common complaint is that Massey does not train young miners. New miners are never hired directly by the company, but first must work for a contractor. A miner has to prove that he will do whatever he is told before getting hired by Massey.

“Massey is all there is around here, they own this place,” said a company miner. “There are a few other mines, like ICG [International Coal Group], but they are basically all the same. That is all there is for people to work at around here.

“It’s crazy to work for them. But what can you do? I went to live in North Carolina for a while, Ohio, and even Florida for a bit. But you couldn’t make a living. When we were about to have our first baby, we moved back here.

“I work, I have to support my family. I roofed houses for a while when I was in North Carolina, I got paid \$9 an hour. After taxes and things, I was taking home \$200 a week. I couldn’t support a family on that.”

Massey’s disregard for the safety of the miners extends to the people who live in the area. Many residents complain that Massey’s mining practices are poisoning the ground water and leading to a high incidence of cancer and other illnesses.

A WSWs reader wrote in about the danger represented by the slurry ponds in which Massey dumps its waste. Massey owns the Brushy Fork Impoundment in West Virginia, which holds 8.2 billion gallons of toxic coal waste, the largest such impoundment in North America. “In their own words, 996 people would die,” if the dam were to break, writes our reader, “and the number could be much higher. They are currently blasting within 200 feet of the impoundment.” Massey operates another slurry pond that sits over an elementary school.



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