

West Virginia mine disaster kills 25, 4 missing

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An explosion in a West Virginia coal mine Monday afternoon killed at least 25 miners. At the time of this writing, 4 other miners were still missing. Shortly after the blast, a state Department of Environmental Protection spokesman confirmed to the media that miners remained trapped underground.

The disaster took place at the Upper Big Branch mine, operated by Performance Coal Co., a subsidiary of coal giant Massey Energy. It is the deadliest mining accident in the US in more than 25 years. In 1984, 27 miners were killed in a fire in a Utah mine.

According to early reports, an explosion around 3 pm Monday caused a roof to collapse at the mine, which is located in Montcoal, some 40 miles south of Charleston. Massey officials told the press that mine rescue teams, along with Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and West Virginia state investigators, were on the scene. Emergency crews from Raleigh, Boone, Kanawha and Logan counties were participating in the effort.

Local television stations in West Virginia referred to reports of 21 miners being removed from the mine and receiving treatment for injuries.

The Associated Press notes that the large mine produced 1.2 million tons of coal in 2009, according to MSHA figures, and has about 200 employees, most of whom work underground.

The CBS news web site reports that the Upper Big Branch Mine “has been previously cited for safety violations and was behind in paying penalties to the Mine Safety and Health Administration.”

Some of the violations disclosed by MSHA include the “cracking and collapsing of the mine sidewalls” in November and December 2009 and February 2010. “The mine violated the standard for ventilation,” reports CBS, “as recently as March 30, and was also cited twice on March 23 and on March 17... There were violations for drill dust on March 25 and for air quality on March 23.”

According to the federal mine safety agency, the mine has been fined \$188,769 in 2010 and has paid \$2,676 to

date. In seven of the last 10 years, writes the *Charleston Gazette*, “the mine has recorded a non-fatal injury rate worse than the national average for similar operations, according to MSHA statistics.”

At least three fatalities have occurred in the non-union mine in the past 12 years. In January 1998, a miner was killed when a support beam collapsed, dumping cement mix and other materials on him. In March 2001, a mine worker was killed by a portion of the roof falling on him, and an electrician died after he was electrocuted while repairing a shuttle car in 2001.

Massey Energy, the fourth largest coal producer in the US, with its headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, has extensive operations in West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. With 2.2 billion tons of coal reserves in the region, the company claims to be the largest coal producer in Central Appalachia.

The last significant mining disaster at a Massey mine took place in January 2006 at the Aracoma Alma Mine No. 1 in Melville, Logan County, West Virginia, when a conveyor belt caught fire and two miners were killed.

Other major mining disasters in the US in recent years include the methane explosion at the Sago Mine in West Virginia in January 2006, which killed 12 coal miners, and the Crandall Canyon disaster in Utah in August 2007, which initially killed six miners and led to the deaths of three rescue workers ten days later.

According to MSHA, the number of miners killed in the US fell in 2009 to 34, the lowest since records were first kept almost a century ago. Fifty-two miners died in 2008.

Massey is notorious for its treatment of miners, as well as its hostility to any environmental regulation. It is also well connected politically. Richard Stickler, who served as acting assistant secretary of labor for the Mine Safety and Health Administration between October 16, 2006 and October 21, 2009, put in a two-year stint at a Massey subsidiary, along with 30 years at the mining division of Bethlehem Steel.

In 1984-85, Massey mobilized enormous resources,

including a large number of thugs, to break a strike by 2,000 members of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The UMWA facilitated the strike-breaking by isolating the Massey miners and refusing to spread the strike.

UMWA president at the time, Richard Trumka, now head of the AFL-CIO, called off the strike in December 1985, leaving hundreds of miners fired and blacklisted.

In 1987, four Massey miners were arrested and framed for the shooting death of a scab coal truck driver in the earlier strike. Each was sentenced to decades in prison, while the UMWA stood by and did nothing.

In recent years, Massey has been the target of multi-million-dollar lawsuits by environmental groups, as well as suits charging corruption and discrimination against miners on the basis of age and former union membership.

In January 2008, Massey Energy agreed to pay a \$20 million civil penalty in a settlement to resolve Clean Water Act violations at coal mines in West Virginia and Kentucky. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, “This is the largest civil penalty in EPA’s history levied against a company for wastewater discharge permit violations.”

The agency alleged “that Massey violated its Clean Water Act permits more than 4,500 times between January 2000 and December 2006. The complaint alleged that Massey discharged excess amounts of metals, sediment, and acid mine drainage into hundreds of rivers and streams in West Virginia and Kentucky. Many of the pollutants were discharged in amounts 40 percent or more than allowed. Some pollutants were discharged at levels more than 10 times over the permit limits.”

In April 2009, Massey announced it was slashing wages and benefits for all its employees by 6 percent, in order to trim payroll costs by between \$50 million and \$60 million.



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