

Miners and friends at memorial service speak on mine explosion

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Several thousand family members, rescue workers, coal miners and friends attended a memorial service Sunday for the 29 miners killed in a coal mine explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia on April 5. The memorial was held in nearby Beckley, West Virginia.

Attendees expressed their sorrow and their support for the families and friends of those who were killed. Others gave voice to anger at Massey Energy and federal and state regulators who allowed the company to continue operating despite a long record of safety violations.

Tom, an unemployed coal miner, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “You have 29 families here that have lost their fathers, husbands, sons and brothers, because Massey doesn’t care about anything but money and coal. They always want more product, they don’t care about the miners. These are 29 men that had families to provide for.

“I don’t work underground anymore. I want to go back,” Tom said. “It is not fair conditions. If Massey Energy has \$90 million in fines and they don’t have to pay them, how much are they going to listen to any labor law? Look, if you or me owe \$9.00 they will come after us, but this company can owe \$90 million and nothing happens to them.”

Nicholas is a young miner who has worked two years for a mining contracting company. “We are here to show our support for these men and their families,” he said.

For Nicholas, like many young people, mining is the only decent paying employment in the area. “I have

worked as a miner for two years. I work for a contracting company. We get sent into mines wherever they need us. I worked in Colorado and here in West Virginia.

“We work nine hour shifts, but a lot of times they will make us work longer hours. You have to do whatever they say if you want a job. I’ve worked at Consol and at Peabody mine; we will get sent wherever they need us. We work for a while and then get sent to another mine. It is hard work, but I love it.

“You start off making \$12 an hour, when you get your black hat you can make \$19 to \$32 an hour depending on your job. That is real good money around here. All the other jobs are minimum wage with no benefits.”

Robert, a Massey miner who worked at the Upper Big Branch mine, was looking at the photos of the 29 killed miners arranged on one of the walls of the convention center. “I worked with these guys. Some of them for 10 years; some just for a few months. I didn’t know them all, but the majority of them I knew.”

Robert worked at the Upper Big Branch mine since 2000 and was working the day of the explosion, “I left the mine six hours before this happened. I was on the night shift. All of these guys were good guys. Some of them just started, some of them had just a few more weeks to go before retiring.

“They were really good men, all of them. We all go into those mines so that we can take care of our families. I am broken hearted. I have gone to as many of the funerals as I could. There were so many men that got killed, some of the funerals were held at the same time. These men are like family to us, and I want their families to know that I am with them.”

Richard explained why he came. “My next door

neighbor was one of the men who was lost there, Gary Quarles. He was a really good guy. Something like this doesn't have to happen. He didn't have that long till he retired.

“He loved his grandkids. I would see him all the time playing with his grandkids in the yard. He was a fun loving family kind of guy. He would go to work every day.”

Alvin, 26, a laid off miner with 4 and a half years experience, described the conditions working at Massey. He used to work for Massey, but quit to work at the Sweet Birch Mine. “I know Mike Elswick, we used to work together.

“I worked for Massey for a long time. I was a bolt man. Whenever you work for Massey they keep you moving. They don't let you stop for lunch unless you want to stay for a second shift.

“Massey is run like the military. You do what you are told by the person above you who does what he is being told by the person above him. If you don't do it, you get fired. That is why I went to the Sweet Birch mine. At the Sweet Birch mine they tell you what you need to do that day, but they don't have somebody standing over you watching you every minute. A few months after I went there, they lost their coal orders, and everyone in 4 or 5 mines got laid off.

“At Massey, whenever the big wigs showed up in the mine, they would clean it up; spread the rock dust, and put up the ventilation curtains. But normally they didn't care; it was just, ‘get your job done’.

Alvin said that Massey cut the number of roof bolters whose job is also to put up ventilation curtains. “You need this in case the miner cuts into a pocket of methane. But instead of having four roof bolters, Massey has only two and we have to go back and fourth from two different miners. You might have one miner cutting in number 1 and say the other is cutting in number 9. They are at least 630 feet apart, and you might be moving with only 4 feet of clearance.

“You can't take the time to put up the curtains. You don't want the foreman to say that they didn't get their production quota because the roof wasn't bolted, because you were putting up curtains rather than bolting the roof. The boss would jump on your back.

Massey has only two bolters rather than four to save money for Massey. If you had four guys, two on each machine, they would have time to put up the curtains.”

Charles, a coal miner for 24 years, said, “I knew Dillard ‘Dewey’ Persinger, we grew up together. I live about 2 or 3 houses down from him. He was a really good guy.

“The safety inspectors had out violations, but the company doesn't care, they just throw them away. They should shut the mine down and not let it run until everything is made right. This should not happen.”



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