

At memorial service for West Virginia miners

Obama preaches reconciliation with coal bosses

Jerry White
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President Obama delivered a eulogy on Sunday for the 29 coal miners killed in the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in Montcoal, West Virginia. The remarks, filled with religious and patriotic rhetoric, were aimed at concealing the criminal responsibility of the mine owners and the complicity of federal and state agencies that allowed miners to work in a deathtrap.

Some two thousand people—including co-workers, family members, friends and workers from other mines—came to the Beckley Convention Center, about 35 miles from the scene of the disaster, to honor their fallen loved ones and comrades. Obama and the state Democratic Party establishment, however, had other motives.

Billed as a service to promote “hope and healing,” the event was aimed at dissipating the anger of miners and their families against Massey Energy and other mine owners. The talk was of reconciliation and forgiveness. The miners, Obama declared, died in pursuit of the “American dream.”

“All of West Virginia is in pain and not without some anger,” US Senator Jay Rockefeller said before the president’s remarks, “But we will bind together as a community because that is what West Virginians do. We will find a way to go on.”

This was an unmistakable appeal to “bind together” with the coal bosses, including Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship who rather than being tried and sentenced for the deaths of 52 miners at his operations over the last decade sat in the audience.

In addition to Rockefeller, US Senator Robert Byrd and Governor Joe Manchin, both Democrats, were also

in attendance. The West Virginia Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, have long been in the pockets of Big Coal. If the miners were to conduct a mass struggle to defend themselves, these politicians would quickly shelve their sympathy for “hard-working miners” and dispatch the state police to arrest them.

In his remarks, President Obama repeated the self-serving theme stated over and over by the media to justify the continued carnage in the coalfields: that mining is a dangerous occupation and disasters are a just a normal part of life in the Appalachia coalfields.

“Most days, they would emerge from the dark mine, squinting at the light,” Obama said. “Most days, they would emerge, sweaty, dirty, dusted with coal. Most days, they would come home. Most days, but not that day.”

“They knew there were risks,” he said, “and so did their families. They knew their kids would say a prayer at night before they left. They knew their wives would wait for a call when their shift ended saying everything was ok.”

Such a presentation is designed to conceal the fact that there were real people responsible for the deadly conditions in the mines. The explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine—the deadliest coal mine disaster in 40 years—was not an “Act of God,” but the inevitable result of the willful disregard of the most basic safety precautions by Massey management, which was determined to extract as much coal out of the mine as possible. Moreover, federal Mine Safety and Health Administration regulators, appointed by the president

himself, are also responsible because they allowed the mine to continue operating despite ample warnings of an impending disaster.

Corporations look at the death of miners as little more than collateral damage in pursuit of ever greater levels of profit. For Obama, however, the miners died while trying to realize the “American Dream.”

“All the hard work. All the hardship. All the time spent underground. It was all for their families,” Obama said. “For a car in the driveway. For a roof overhead. For a chance to give their kids opportunities they never knew; and enjoy retirement with their wives. It was all in the hopes of something better. These miners lived—as they died—in pursuit of the American dream.”

It would be more honest to say they lived and died as part of the American nightmare. Miners in the area were forced to take their lives in their own hands in an effort to escape the poverty that prevails in West Virginia, the third poorest state in the nation, lagging only behind Mississippi and Louisiana.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, a foreman at the Upper Big Branch Mine described the brutal conditions workers faced in the mine, where each day methane levels were double or triple the allowable levels. “Have you ever been scared for your life, when you go to work in the morning—daily. That’s what went on down there. Daily. I’ve had guys come to me and cry. Grown men cried because they’re scared,” he said.

Describing Massey’s top management, he added, “They don’t care about nobody down there. I heard them make a statement that a man is like a roof bolt. You bend him till he breaks, then you get another one.”

Miners and friends attending the service related similar experiences to the WSWS. (See, “Miners and friends at memorial service speak on mine explosion”.)

The president made no reference to this damning evidence or the accumulated safety regulations that were ignored by Massey and not acted on by federal regulators. Knowing full well that these deadly conditions would continue not only at Massey but throughout the industry, he continued, “How can a nation that relies on its miners not do everything in its power to protect them? How can we let anyone in this country put their lives at risk by simply showing up to work? By simply pursuing the American dream?”

“We cannot bring back the 29 men we lost,” he added. “They are with the Lord now. Our task, here on Earth, is to save lives from being lost in another such tragedy. To do what we must do, individually and collectively, to assure safe conditions underground. To treat our miners like they treat each other—like a family. Because we are all family and we are all Americans and we have to lean on each other.”

Miners have heard such pronouncements time and again. After the 2006 disaster at the Sago Mine that killed 12 West Virginia miners, Democratic and Republican politicians swore to improve safety conditions and hold the coal operators accountable. Instead, measures were taken that provided the owners a vast loophole to escape fines and continue operating their unsafe mines. Nothing of any substance has changed in the transition from a Republican to a Democratic administration.

Obama’s remarks make clear that there will be no attempt to hold accountable those responsible for the deaths of the 29 miners, including Massey Energy and its CEO Don Blankenship. The investigation launched by the federal government will merely be another whitewash.

While various politicians and the news media have attempted to present Massey as a “bad apple” in an otherwise safe and conscientious industry, deaths and injuries are occurring in other mines as well.

On Friday, a 28-year-old miner was killed just eight miles west of Beckley, in Eccles, West Virginia, when he was crushed between a continuous mining machine and the mine wall. The mine is owned by International Coal Group, which also owns the Sago Mine.



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