

# Mine disaster exposes the brutal reality of American capitalism

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In the nine days since a massive explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia claimed the lives of 29 miners, evidence has continued to accumulate demonstrating the criminality of the mine's operator, Massey Energy, and the complicity of the federal and state agencies that allowed the mine to continue operating despite ample warnings of an impending disaster.

Four years ago, the deaths of 12 West Virginia miners at the Sago Mine and 2 others at Massey's Aracoma mine prompted congressional hearings and pledges to overhaul safety procedures and demand greater accountability from coal operators. The needless deaths of 29 miners in the April 5 explosion—the deadliest mine disaster in four decades—show that the transition to a Democratic-controlled White House and Congress has changed nothing. Miners' lives continue to be wantonly sacrificed to profit.

Last Friday, President Obama announced that the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA)—headed by former United Mine Workers safety director Joe Main—would provide him with a preliminary report “on what went wrong and why it went wrong so badly, so that we can take the steps necessary to prevent such accidents in the future.”

Such an investigation—conducted by officials who routinely collaborate with and run interference for the coal companies—will be nothing but a whitewash. Those responsible for the miners' deaths—Massey CEO Don Blankenship and other top executives—will not be held accountable, and they will be allowed to continue their deadly policies.

In his remarks, Obama quoted from a letter written by one of the miners killed in the blast, 25-year-old Josh Napper. The miner left the letter for his girlfriend

before he left for work Monday morning, April 5. Obama cited the sentence: “If anything happens to me, I'll be looking down from heaven to you all.”

Obama did not comment on what this letter shows about the deadly conditions under which the Upper Big Branch miners were forced to work. If Napper felt the need to write such a letter to his loved ones, he—like the other miners—was well aware that he was walking into a tinderbox.

Far from citing Napper's letter to expose the responsibility of Massey for the young man's death, Obama used it to promulgate the cynical propaganda of the government and the media about long-suffering miners who accept death and injury as an unavoidable aspect of life in the coalfields. Mining, the president said, is “a profession that's not without risks and danger, and the workers and their families know that.”

The explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine, however, was not some inexplicable and unforeseen “act of God.” It was the result of deliberate decisions and actions by Massey executives and government regulators who were more concerned with production and profit than the lives of miners.

In an effort to conceal this fact, Obama claimed, “Their government and their employers know that they owe it to these families to do everything possible to ensure their safety when they go to work each day.”

The facts show that the exact opposite is the case. Both the government and Massey permitted operations at the Upper Big Branch Mine to continue despite repeated indications that explosive methane gas and coal dust were accumulating to unlawful and dangerous levels.

Just three days before the disaster, Josh Napper called his mother to report that the entire work crew had been sent home early because of bad ventilation. “I just

knew that Josh in his heart knew that something was going to happen,” said the mother, who lost a son, a brother and a nephew in the blast.

Since 2009, MSHA officials have ordered the mine or parts of the mine to temporarily cease operations 61 times, including 7 times this year. Last month alone, the mine received at least 50 safety violation citations, including at least 3 for failing to properly ventilate methane gas. Safety officials found that airflow in the mine was half what was needed to prevent the buildup of methane and coal dust.

The blatant disregard for safety coincided with the tripling of production at the mine last year and a cost-cutting drive by Massey at all of its pits, which included the layoff of 700 miners, wage and benefit cuts, and regular 12-hour shifts.

Despite the imminent dangers, MSHA took no action to close the mine. Instead, federal regulators went through the motions of inspecting the mine and issuing safety violation citations and fines, knowing full well that the company would appeal them.

The news media and several coal state politicians have attempted to portray Massey as a bad apple in an otherwise safe and conscientious industry. Democratic Senator John D. Rockefeller, for example, characterized Massey Energy as a “rogue” operator.

Massey and its CEO Don Blankenship are not aberrations. They are true representatives—perhaps more open than others—of the business model of American capitalism. The relations that prevail in the mines are a concentrated expression of class relations under the profit system—relations of ruthless exploitation of the majority by a small and fabulously wealthy minority, who are backed by all of the institutions of the state and official society.

While funneling trillions to Wall Street, the Obama administration has embarked on an offensive against the working class even more sweeping than that conducted by Reagan in the 1980s.

That decade saw a violent union-busting campaign against the coal miners, aimed at breaking the back of the most militant and class-conscious section of the American working class. It was spearheaded by what was then called AT Massey Coal and by Blankenship, with the backing of the Reagan administration and state and local politicians of both parties.

The key to the defeat of the Massey miners was the

treachery of the United Mine Workers (UMW) leadership, headed by President Richard Trumka (now head of the AFL-CIO), who refused to mobilize the miners nationally and left the Massey strikers isolated, until the UMW finally called off the strike.

Today, conditions in the Appalachian coalfields resemble those of a century ago. Miners have no organization to defend themselves against brutal exploitation and a government that is in the pockets of the corporations and Wall Street. Under these conditions, coal companies are free to knowingly carry out, with impunity, policies that mean death and injury to workers.

All those responsible for the deaths at the Upper Big Branch mine, beginning with Blankenship, should face criminal prosecution. This is a necessary step in a fundamental restructuring of the mining industry to guarantee the health and safety of miners, provide jobs at good wages and benefits for all who wish to work in the coalfields, and organize the industry to meet social needs, not private profit.

None of this will be carried out by appealing to the powers-that-be. Miners and the working class as a whole can defend their interests only inasmuch as they are organized as a class to fight the corporations and their bought-and-paid-for representatives in both big business parties. This must take a conscious political and revolutionary form, on the basis of a socialist program.

The carnage in the mines can be ended only if workers take the industry out of private hands and put it under the democratic and collective control of the working people themselves.

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