

Massey shut off methane detectors at deadly mine

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Coal miners who worked at the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia, where a deadly blast killed 29 miners on April 5, told federal investigators that Massey foremen ordered an electrician, over his objections, to disable a methane detector on a continuous mining machine in the months before the explosion occurred.

Ricky Lee Campbell and other witnesses said that they witnessed the incident on February 13 at a site in the mine several miles from the location of the April disaster.

The company has confirmed that the incident took place, but claims that it was done because the detector was malfunctioning. Massey says that it wanted to move the machine to a safer area, where it could be repaired.

Campbell and the other miners have disagreed, however, stating that the machine was kept in operation. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, which first reported the story, interviewed the electrician, George Holtzapfel, who confirmed Campbell's account.

"That's how it went," Holtzapfel told the *Post-Gazette* after hearing Campbell's story. "I've worked for probably six or eight coal companies. They're all the same. They all do the same practices. It's not something that was new. It was just new to me," he said.

A continuous mining machine, or continuous miner, is a 30-foot machine with a large drum on the front, equipped with teeth, that continuously turns. It is used to break the coal and rock from the coalface. Coalfaces give off methane gas. During operations the machine will often hit a pocket of methane. When the teeth of the continuous miner strike rock, they give off millions of sparks. These sparks can ignite the methane, if the concentrations are too high.

The methane detectors are set to automatically shut the machine down when methane levels reach 1 percent. A 5 percent methane concentration is explosive. Federal law states that all continuous miners must be equipped with such safety devices.

Miners reported that in the weeks before the deadly explosion at least two small methane explosions occurred while they were mining coal. While the government investigation into the April 5 blast has not yet been completed, miners and safety experts believe that a methane explosion, which then ignited a larger and more powerful coal dust explosion, caused the deadly events.

Campbell and the other miners' accounts confirm what many Massey miners, family members and residents of the Montcoal, West Virginia, area told the *World Socialist Web Site* in the days following the disaster—it was common practices for supervisors to order miners to bypass and ignore methane detectors in Massey operations.

"I've seen machines where the sniffers have been bridged," one miner told the WSWs in mid-April. (A sniffer is the device that samples the air for methane. Bridging it means the device was bypassed.) "And others that have had a bag put over them," he added.

Other workers explained to the WSWs that they were often ordered to continue working despite alarms from their handheld methane detectors. They further reported that coal dust levels were too high and that Massey regularly refused to take steps necessary to reduce the amount suspended in the air.

According to these miners, Massey did not make sure that the mine was properly ventilated, so as to prevent a buildup of explosive methane gas. Workers were also

not given time to hang curtains in the mine, which are used to direct the air flow as the mining machines move deeper into the earth. (See WSWS verifies Massey's threat to fire workers who took off work to attend funerals.)

Shortly after the April 5 explosion, Campbell spoke to several media outlets about the unsafe conditions at the mine. Massey quickly fired him on a trumped-up charge. An administrative law judge has since ruled that Campbell was unfairly fired for speaking out and ordered that he be reinstated to his job.

Campbell's testimony and that of his fellow miners confirm the criminal nature of Massey's operations. In press statements, the coal giant has repeatedly stated that it has never condoned any action at its mines that violate safety laws. The implication of this being that any violations uncovered by the federal government in its investigation were the fault of local supervisors, not company executives.

However, Campbell's firing and subsequent efforts to silence him demonstrate that top Massey officials are involved in a cover-up of conditions at the West Virginia mine. These actions are intended to have a chilling effect on other miners in the area, where mining is often the only paying job.

From the time of the April 5 explosion, Massey has been working non-stop to deny its responsibility for the disaster and to place the blame on others. They have hired a public relations firm, led by a top spokesman of the former Bush administration, to assist them in this effort.

Miners, their families and other workers should have no illusions that the federal criminal investigation into the Upper Big Branch disaster, or for that matter action by any other section of the government, will halt Massey's and other coal companies' unsafe operations.

The federal investigation is in fact part of the cover-up of Massey. Last month, after four years of investigation, the Federal government indicted four low-level supervisors at Massey Energy's Aracoma Alma Number One mine in Logan County, West Virginia, where two miners were killed in 2006.

None of Massey's top executives were charged in the miners' deaths, and those facing prosecution men are charged with misdemeanor offenses related to not conducting proper safety classes for the work crews.

As has happened at the Aracoma mine, if any

criminal charges are ever brought in relation to the disaster at the Upper Big Branch mine, they will be years in the making and directed at only a handful of low-level supervisors.

Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) officials who are conducting the investigation have already begun indicating that it may take until the end of the year just to complete their work and much longer to report their findings.

MSHA itself shares responsibility for the deaths at Massey, as it allowed the mine to continue to operate despite a massive number of repeated serious safety violations.

For their part, Democrats in Congress have all but abandoned measures to tighten safety rules in the mines. If a preliminary mine-safety bill currently in the House of Representatives even passes, it is expected to die in the Senate. And even this legislation would do little to protect miners. In particular, it contains no provisions for lowering legal limits on the amount of coal dust in mines, which is the primary cause of black lung disease, a painful ailment responsible for more than 400 deaths yearly and the disabling of thousands of workers.

Since at least 1995, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has recommended reducing the amount of coal dust allowed in mines, but MSHA officials of the Clinton, Bush, and now Obama administrations have refused to implement these recommendations. Most recently, Joe Main, the current head of MSHA, cancelled plans to impose precisely such a stricter limit.



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