

Forty-eight US miners killed in 2010 — most since 1992

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Forty-eight coal miners were killed on the job last year, making it the highest number of miners killed since 1992, when 55 miners lost their lives. Twenty-nine of those who died were killed April 5, in the deadly explosion that tore through Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia.

Rock falls and machine accidents killed 19 other miners. In addition, hundreds of miners have died from black lung and other respiratory diseases that go largely unreported.

All of these deaths could have been prevented. None of these men had to die. Blame rests on the mining industry, which bypassed basic safety procedures in its push for greater and greater profits; on both Democratic and Republican politicians, who ignored the enforcement of health and safety laws; and on the United Mine Workers union (UMW), which has obstinately refused to represent miners, and has in fact worked in the interest of the coal operators to ensure maximum profits.

The rising death toll for US mine workers corresponds to the deaths of miners in New Zealand, China, Russia, throughout Africa and many parts of the world.

The tragedy at the Upper Big Branch mine was the worst coal mining disaster in 40 years. The explosion tore through more than two and a half miles of underground mine tunnels and passageways with so much power that railroad tracks were left twisted like pretzels. Miners working more than two miles away from the explosion were killed.

After nearly nine months, the investigation into the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine continues to drag on, and no official explanation has yet been given. Mine safety experts along with miners believe that a blast of such power could only have occurred as an initial methane explosion, which set off a secondary coal dust explosion that propagated throughout the mine.

In the previous 18 months, the Massey-owned mine had accumulated more than 600 citations for violations of federal safety laws and regulations, including improper ventilation, allowing the buildup of explosive coal dust on belt and passageways, and not having proper safety plans. In the

month before the disaster, inspectors issued 50 citations against the mine, including for inadequate venting of methane and for poor escape routes.

While parts of the mine were ordered temporarily closed dozens of times in the course of 2009 because of violations presenting imminent danger to miners, government officials working in the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) never took the measures to close the mine and stop production until its safety could be guaranteed.

Since the explosion, some details of the total disregard for the safety of the miners by Massey officials, a fact already well known to the miners and their families, has become known to the public. There have been several cases of company officials ordering the disabling of methane detectors that would have shut down machines and warned miners long before methane concentrations reached explosive levels. Company officials forged documents certifying that foremen received the training they needed to conduct safety inspections.

Massey miners report that the company routinely did not "rock dust" the coal dust, a method of spreading ground-up rock to dilute coal dust and prevent coal dust explosions. Nor did the company install curtains needed to direct fresh airflows to the face of the mine.

Of the 19 other miners killed in 2010, 9 or nearly half were killed in powered haulage accidents, 6 were killed by the falling of either the roof or walls, 3 were killed by mining machinery and 1 was killed in an explosion.

Powered haulage accidents, relating to the trucks that are used to transport coal, men and materials throughout the mine and surface area, are among the most common ways that coal miners are killed on the job. Cost-cutting by mine owners frequently results in overloaded trucks and poor maintenance of equipment. Often, boards are added to the tops of trucks to increase the amount of coal they can hold, but this practice blocks the driver's view and dangerously increases the weight of the vehicle. In many accidents, ill-maintained brakes failed, or trucks overturned on steep work sites, crushing the driver.

In each of the cases where miners were killed by roof or rib falls for which investigators have finished their reports, they found that not enough support for the roof or walls was applied to hold the rock and coal in place.

Government officials have only published reports on two of the three men killed in machinery accidents. In both of those reports, their deaths could have been prevented if the coal operators had taken greater measures in training the miners and creating safer work methods. This translates into inexperienced miners who were hired at low pay to work under very dangerous and unstable conditions. No report has been issued yet on one other miner killed in an explosion.

The MSHA does not make readily available information on the violations and fines issued to the coal operators for these deaths. In the majority of cases, they are small, token amounts, and often they are further reduced in a drawn-out appeals process. Considered part of the “cost of doing business” in the industry, companies routinely launch legal challenges to fines. Currently, the MSHA has a backlog of 19,000 cases against operators.

The 2006 disasters at the Sago mine, the Darby mine and a number of other accidents in which 47 miners were killed, sparked a series of investigations and congressional hearings that led to the passage of the MINERS Act, a set of laws increasing MSHA authority. At the time, the WSWS warned that these measures were being taken to defuse the growing and popular anger, but that they would not protect the miners.

Needless to say, after the Upper Big Branch disaster and string of deaths this year, they have not even gone through these motions. The MSHA investigation has all but stalled. Massey CEO Don Blankenship, along with a whole host of Massey officials, refused to testify. No charges have been filed in the criminal investigation against Massey officials, and special investigator Davitt McAteer has not held any hearings.

Blankenship, who retired December 31, is set to receive a golden parachute worth tens of millions of dollars, including at least \$12 million in cash over the next six months and more than \$27 million in deferred compensation. He will also cash in on “generous” stock options, and continue to receive free health care, a mansion free of charge for life, and an \$18,240-per-month “salary continuation retirement benefit.”

Despite repeated pledges to strengthen mine safety, a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress and a Democratic president put no new laws in place.

The election of the Republican majority in Congress has meant a dropping of pretenses regarding enforcement of the coal industry. On December 8, Congress actively blocked mine safety legislation that was promised in the wake of the

UBB disaster. West Virginia Democratic Party senators Jay Rockefeller and newly elected Joe Manchin, the former governor, have called for less enforcement of environmental regulations that are seen to impede the profits of coal operators.

Behind the rise in mining fatalities is the unceasing drive for productivity and profits in the mines. Since 1978, US coal production has increased 86 percent from 632 million tons to more than 1,173 million tons in 2008, the last year for which figures are available. And while the number of coal miners has decreased from 219,661 to 110,052, the amount of coal being produced per year per miner has shot up from 2,876 to 10,659 tons.

Much of the productivity increase can be attributed to the greater adoption of long wall and surface mining and the use of continuous mining machines. However, rising production rates must also be attributed to increasing disregard for safety, maintenance of the machinery and structural integrity of mines, and the grinding and brutal exploitation of the miners.

The overall deteriorating health and safety conditions in the mines can most graphically be seen by the growth in black lung, the very painful and deadly pulmonary disease caused by the destruction of lung tissue from breathing in coal dust.

After decades of decline, the rate of black lung disease has doubled since 1997, and is hitting miners at a younger age. Primarily, this is caused by miners being exposed to more coal dust over a longer period. Since 1978, the number of hours worked by underground coal miners has increased from 1,700 to nearly 2,400 a year.

The increase in miners’ deaths further underscores the treacherous role played by the United Mine Workers. Over the last 30 years, the UMW has systematically sabotaged every struggle of the coal miners and worked with the coal operators and government to destroy the gains won by miners in previous generations, in order to make American coal operators more competitive on the world market.



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