

Report on US mine disaster: An indictment of American capitalism

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The recently released findings from an investigation into last year's explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia expose the brutal and deadly conditions in the US coal industry.

The April 5, 2010 explosion was “a completely predictable result for a company that ignored basic safety standards,” the investigators appointed by then-governor Joe Manchin concluded. Coal giant Massey Energy “operated its mines in a profoundly reckless manner, and 29 coal miners paid with their lives for the corporate risk-taking.”

While top Massey officials—including former CEO Don Blankenship—were given updates every half hour on production targets, the report found, they turned a blind eye to the warnings of what would become the worst coal mining disaster in 40 years.

Safety precautions—developed more than a century ago—were ignored, including ensuring proper ventilation and dusting work areas with pulverized limestone to prevent deadly methane gas and coal dust explosions. Safety equipment was deliberately disabled or left in disrepair, including water sprayers designed to quickly put out a fire produced by sparks during the coal-cutting process.

Such a spark ignited accumulated methane gas, the probe found, generating a massive blast, fueled by coal dust, which traveled through miles of tunnels, destroying everything in its path and killing the 29 miners without warning.

The description of the exploitation of the workers reads like a passage from Emile Zola's *Germinal*, a novel about the near-slavery conditions of French miners in the 1880s. Massey functioned as an overlord, demanding that production continue at all costs, forcing miners to work in chest-deep water and suspending foremen who stopped production out of safety concerns.

Workers interviewed by investigators described the mine as a “ticking time bomb” and said they were afraid for their lives but did not complain because they were “job-scared.” This pressure was exacerbated by “enhanced employment agreements,” which compelled any miner who quit or was fired before the expiration of his three-year agreement to pay

back thousands of dollars in production bonuses, and prohibited them from working at any competitor's mine within a 90-mile radius.

Massey Energy is not a fly-by-night operation or some rogue company. At the time of the disaster, it was the fourth largest coal producer in the US. It has since been bought out in a \$7.1 billion deal by Alpha Natural Resources, making the new company the second largest in the US and the third largest producer of metallurgical coal in the world.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of criminality in the deaths of the miners, no major official from Massey has been indicted, let alone jailed, in more than a year. On the contrary, CEO Don Blankenship has gone into retirement with a \$44 million bonus and pension package, while other equally guilty executives are being retained in the new company.

Despite its damning revelations, the Upper Big Branch report attempts to portray Massey as a “bad apple” in an otherwise healthy industry. This is completely false. Not only do the conditions that created the disaster prevail throughout the mining industry, they prevail in one form or another throughout American society as a whole.

Massey, moreover, did not act alone. Complicit in this disaster, as in the others, was the federal government and state regulators. This includes the Mine Safety and Health Administration, which allowed Massey to continue its operation despite issuing hundreds of citations for flagrant violations. As for state regulators, the report notes, “It has long been an accepted practice in West Virginia for mine safety regulators to move with relative ease from employment in the industry to government and back.”

Now, the Obama administration, which is spending a pittance on MSHA—about one hundredth of the \$35 billion in revenues collected annually by the mine operators—is inviting even more disasters as it moves to further deregulate the economy on behalf of the most powerful corporate and financial interests.

The Upper Big Branch disaster was one product of a social counterrevolution pursued by the American ruling elite,

aimed at turning the clock backwards and destroying all of the social achievements won by the working class over a century of struggle.

The history of regulations in the mine industry is a history of bitter class conflict. Coal miners in the 1910s were killed in explosions and roof falls at a greater rate than American forces in World War I. Although measures to improve safety were proposed following the 1907 explosion in Monongah, West Virginia, which killed 500 men and boys, most mining companies refused to implement them and mine deaths and injuries were considered the cost of doing business.

Minor reforms were granted in the aftermath of the Mine Wars of the 1920s, when miners—denounced by the mine owners as Bolsheviks and anarchists after the 1917 Russian Revolution—rose up in a virtual insurrection in southern West Virginia. They answered in kind the violent resistance of the coal operators, their hired gunmen and the government.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, however, that the federal government mandated any meaningful reforms. This followed the 1968 disaster in Farmington, West Virginia, which killed 78 miners, and the rebellion of the miners against the corrupt leadership of United Mine Workers (UMW) President Tony Boyle—who immediately came to the defense of Consolidated Coal Company. In 1969, Congress passed the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act (Coal Act), which provided for monetary and criminal penalties for violations.

In five years after the passage of the Coal Act, the rate of coal mine fatalities declined 37 percent; the fatality rate again dropped 25 percent in the five years after the passage of the Federal Mine and Health Act of 1977. The measures—which also included the first compensation for Black Lung disease—were the product of a wave of strikes and other militant struggles, including the 111-day strike in 1977-78 when miners defied the Carter administration and National Guard troops.

The terrible reversal suffered by the miners—long the most militant section of the American working class—began in earnest in the 1980s and coincided with a similar attack on the British coal miners by Margaret Thatcher. Miners fought courageously, but their struggles—including the bitter 1984-85 walkout against Massey coal—were betrayed by the UMW and its president, Richard Trumka, now the head of the AFL-CIO.

The UMW, like every other trade union, subordinated the interests of workers to the competitive needs of the corporations and its alliance with the Democrats. As the ruling class went on the offensive, the unions worked consciously to suppress the militant traditions of the working class. This has allowed the coal companies to re-impose

conditions of exploitation not seen since the turn of the last century.

This corporate criminality, combined with the absence of any accountability, is not unique to Massey and the coal industry. It has become a characteristic feature of American society. Wall Street banks and hedge funds set off a world recession, destroying millions of jobs with untold consequences, and no one is held accountable. Oil company BP's reckless pursuit of profit led to the deaths of 11 workers and produced the greatest environmental disaster in US history, the consequences of which will be felt for generations, and the company gets away with nothing more than a slap on the wrist.

These conditions are an indictment of American capitalism, a system that subordinates every aspect of life, including life itself, to the enrichment of the corporate and financial elite. The most minimum requirements of workers—including the right to a safe and secure livelihood—brings workers into a conflict with the entire economic and political system.

The safety of miners can take precedence over the profit drive of the coal operators only by establishing workers' control over production. This will require transforming the mining industry into a publicly owned utility, as part of the socialist economy based on human need, not private profit.

All those responsible for the killing and maiming of miners must be held legally responsible. The ill-gotten gains of the corporate executives must be confiscated to drastically improve working conditions and employ state-of-the-art technology to protect the lives and limbs of those who mine coal.

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