Coal mine rescue brings to light desperate social conditions in West Virginia

Naomi Spencer
17 December 2018

The disappearance and subsequent rescue of four missing West Virginians in a remote, inactive coal mine made for dramatic national television news last week. All but ignored in the coverage, however, is what the incident reveals about the economic and social distress that plagues the once major coal mining region of the US.

After spending four frightful days in the abandoned mine near Clear Creek, West Virginia, Cody Beverly, 21, Kayla Williams, 25, and Erica Treadway, 31, were rescued on December 13. Two days earlier, 43-year old Eddie Williams was able to make his way out to safety on his own.

The four were reported missing on December 7 after their all-terrain vehicle (ATV) was found near the secluded entrance of the Rock House Powellton mine in Raleigh County, near the Boone County town of Whitesville.

A rescue operation mounted by the local sheriff's office was joined by the state Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training (MHS&T) and then the West Virginia National Guard and the State Police. Rescuers were initially prevented from accessing the mine because of heavy snow and rough terrain. After entering the mine, rescuers had to turn back multiple times because of high water and low oxygen levels.

Adding to the concerns about their fate was the fact that the tragedy was unfolding just a few miles from the scene of the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster, where 29 miners lost their lives in a massive explosion. The vigil kept by family members of the missing, waiting for word of their loved ones, was reminiscent of the countless tragedies in the coalfields.

The initial reaction of political figures was to denounce the four for allegedly going into the abandoned mine to collect copper and other valuable metals. Several officials floated the idea that, if rescued, they would face immediate arrest.

Republican Governor Jim Justice, a billionaire coal executive, issued a press release calling for people to "please STOP entering the abandoned mines. This is extremely irresponsible behavior that puts our first responders and mine safety crews in unsafe situations when they should be focused on ensuring safety at active mines. I cannot stress enough how dangerous these abandoned mines are and how hazardous they are to humans."

With an outpouring of popular concern and sympathy, Justice changed his tune and decided to travel to Whitesville last Monday night to appear before the cameras with rescue workers and family members of the missing. "These families, friends, and the entire community are really hurting and need to be in our prayers," Justice told the media.

After making his way out of the mine, Williams gave rescuers information on the location of his friends, who were found on Wednesday evening nearly two miles below ground. The three were discovered oxygen deprived, dehydrated and hungry, cold, and soaking wet. They were evaluated by medical workers at the surface, and, after a tearful reunion with their families, transported to a local hospital for care.

Cody Beverly told NBC News that the harrowing four-day experience felt like "10, 11 days." They had heard rescuers inside looking for them, but they were too weak and remote to make contact. "We could hear them, but you know we would scream at the top of our lungs, and I guess they just couldn't hear us," he said. "We thought we was honestly hallucinating." The oxygen level was so low, Beverly said, the three could only move about 15 feet before collapsing again.

While there was enormous relief that all four had been found alive, the authorities immediately said they would be subject of a criminal investigation. "It's illegal to enter a closed mine," County sheriff's Lt. M.A. McCray said, no matter what the intent. "We think they went in to steal copper wiring," McCray told *USA TODAY*. "Typically, when mines close the wire is left behind, and people will often times try to steal the copper. That is how it's being investigated."

Although it has not been definitely determined whether the four were searching for copper, family members pointed to the economic desperation driving many unemployed or underemployed workers to take such dangerous chances.

"It's worth money," Randy Williams, referring to copper, told ABC News while rescuers were still searching for his daughter, Kayla, "A couple years ago it was up to almost $4 a pound. You could go into a mine and make $1,000 a day." People would do "whatever they can to do to make money if they ain't got a job," Williams told CBS.

Stripping copper from mines is common in West Virginia, and inactive mines often have thousands of dollars' worth of the metal inside. Indeed, such activities are endemic to impoverished rural areas and deindustrialized urban areas in the US alike. The conditions in America increasingly resemble those in the most impoverished countries, like South Africa where "illegal miners" go down abandoned mines, and sometimes live for days, to mine for gold and other valuable minerals.

It is a measure of the social catastrophe facing large swaths of the population in the US that millions of dollars' worth of metal has been scrapped from highway light poles, telecommunications infrastructure, shuttered factories, schools, and other facilities across the country. It is bought by junkyards for around $2 a pound and turned around for profit. The few dollars a pound of metal can bring is enough to risk life and limb for many in these areas.

However, these property crimes are nothing compared to the crimes of the propertied. After making vast fortunes the coal and energy companies have largely abandoned West Virginia and other mining areas leaving nothing behind but an economic, social and ecological catastrophe.

The Appalachian Regional Commission estimates that fewer than 60 percent of working-age adults in the central Appalachian region have jobs. At its peak in 1940, the mining industry employed some 140,000 people in West Virginia; at that time, about one in three employed workers were miners. Today, MHS&T data indicates less than 11,000 underground miners remain employed in the state—about 2 percent of the workforce.

Today, Whitesville has hemorrhaged residents and jobs, with the federal Census estimating a population of just over 460. Four in ten live in poverty, and median household income stands at $16,190. The state's opioid death rate is triple the already tragic national rate, and southern West Virginia has among the lowest life expectancy in the industrialized world.

Raleigh, Boone, McDowell, Mingo and other southern West Virginia counties were once strongholds of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union. The current disaster is the product of decades of collusion with the energy bosses and capitalist politicians by the UMW and its betrayal of major struggles, including strikes as AT Massey in 1985-86 and Pittston in 1989-90.

The sprawling Rock House mine, owned by Alpha Natural Resources company Contura Energy and operated by the Elk Run Coal Company, LLC, has been inactive for two years. It is one of numerous abandoned mines in the area.

Alpha Natural Resources bears significant responsibility for the desperate economic conditions of the region. Like Patriot Coal and other mining companies in the past decade, Alpha responded to declining coal demand by declaring bankruptcy in 2015. The company sold off its profitable assets in the Appalachian, Pennsylvania, and western coalfields to its spin-off company Contura Energy. As part the agreement, the court gave Alpha the green light to break its contract with the UMW and end contributions to the union retiree health and pension funds.

Contura Energy, under the management of former Alpha CEO Kevin S. Crutchfield, has unceremoniously shut down operations that were not profitable enough and thrown hundreds of miners out of work. After several years of this corporate shell game, Contura has reported revenues of $447,871,000 as of November, $60,000,000 more than a year ago.

Although entire counties of coal-producing states have been decimated, Mr. Crutchfield sleeps well with an annual compensation of $2.46 million in pay and stock options.

Metal scrappers have gone missing in West Virginia mines on a regular basis over the past few years. Just last month, rescuers called off a search for a man missing in Boone County believed to be looking for copper in an abandoned coal mine. In the past two weeks, four other men were arrested in trespassing in two other mines in the state.

The state has long been politically dominated by the coal industry, even as its economic standing has collapsed. In an interview with local television station WCHS, West Virginia Coal Association Senior Vice President Chris Hamilton called for strict punishment for people who trespassed into abandoned mines. "It just consumes a lot of time and resources of safety and rescue professionals whose time is needed elsewhere," Hamilton sniffed.

The hue and cry over so-called copper theft has been coupled with high legal penalties. The conviction of the father of one of the rescued men, reportedly serving a ten-year prison sentence for metal theft, was splashed across local news as supposed evidence that the four were stealing copper and, in the words of a WSAZ report, "should have known better."

Since the Rock House mine is classified by the state as "approved inactive" rather than "abandoned," it can be reopened at a certain point and does not need to be sealed. Elk Run Coal is required only to minimally secure the property.

Hundreds of mines across central Appalachia that ceased operations prior to 1977 are not only abandoned without being secured but are often unmapped by regulators. Open mine portals, faces, highwalls, and other dangers are obscured in underbrush and result in accidents and injury by hikers and ATV riders.

The federal Abandoned Mine Land Inventory System (AMLIS) estimates that some 300,000 abandoned mines are located in Appalachia. "There have been many instances of active mines unintentionally cutting into adjacent mines which were not properly identified prior to mining," the system's web site notes. Hundreds of accidental cut-throughs have resulted in inundations of active mines with water.

In West Virginia, AMLIS lists nearly $1.8 billion in unfunded abandoned mine cleanup projects. Nearly 2,000 underground mine fires rage, 2,082 abandoned portals are unsealed, and 1,000 "dangerous impoundments," containing coal waste water and other toxic materials, are just waiting to rupture.