

Two missing in fire at West Virginia coal mine

By Larry Porter and Jerry Isaacs
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Less than three weeks after the Sago Mine disaster claimed the lives of 12 coal miners, two more men were trapped in a West Virginia mine Thursday night after a fire on a conveyor belt spread poisonous carbon monoxide throughout the mine. At the time of this writing, rescuers have not been able to reach the two miners, identified as Ellery Hatfield and Donald Bragg, who were separated from co-workers as they made the two-hour journey to escape the smoke-filled mine.

The fire broke out around 5:36 p.m. Thursday inside the Alma Mine in Melville, about 60 miles southwest of the state capital of Charleston, in Logan County. The mine is owned by Aracoma Coal, a subsidiary of the notoriously anti-labor Massey Energy Corp., the fourth-largest coal company in the US.

In the last two years, the nonunion mine has received more than 200 citations from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), the most recent on December 20, when the mine was issued seven violations ranging from failure to control coal dust and other combustible materials to a poor ventilation plan. Records show there was fatality at the mine in 1995. The Alma mine, which had an accident rate 30 percent higher than the national average last year, paid \$13,000 in fines in 2005.

On Friday morning, two rescue teams were more than 10,000 feet inside the mine but were forced back by fire and noxious gases. Visibility was so poor that rescuers had to attach themselves to each other. “We went as far as we could go,” stated Doug Conaway, director of West Virginia’s Office of Miners’ Health Safety and Training. “We were hoping that maybe we could go all the way, but conditions dictate the changes. We need to come back. We need to get the fire under control.”

The section of the mine where the men are reportedly

trapped is interlaced with six miles of tunnels. According to news reports, the two miners were among two crews of 19 miners in all who were working about 900 feet underground when the fire started. After dangerous levels of carbon monoxide were detected, company officials told the miners to leave, and they donned breathing equipment and made their way to the mine exit.

The missing miners were apparently separated from a group of 10 others who tried to hold hands as they made their way out. Nine other miners in another part of the mine also escaped.

Frida Hatfield, the wife of one of the missing miners, told the *Logan Banner*, “I don’t really know anything. Nobody even called me. I heard it from somebody else. I called down to the mine and they said they couldn’t give me any information. I called one of my friends and she said ‘Frida, I just didn’t know what to say to you, but, yes, Ellery is trapped.’ ”

Frida told the local newspaper that she and Ellery have been married 10 years and he has been working at the Alma No. 1 Mine for the past five. “They said they believed they’d be alright,” Hatfield said of early reports that officials believed the two miners would be brought out alive. “They’re not telling us how long it might take or nothing.”

In scenes reminiscent of the unfolding tragedy earlier this month, family members and friends gathered at the local Baptist church to await word. West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin acknowledged, “Time is not our friend. The longer it goes, the more difficult it becomes. We’re still very hopeful, but cautiously hopeful.” Alluding to the deadly outcome of the Sago Mine disaster, the governor said he “still believed in miracles.”

This is the second mining disaster to hit the small

state of West Virginia in less than three weeks. On January 2, less than 200 miles away in Upshur County, 12 miners were killed at the Sago Mine after being trapped by an underground explosion. One miner, Randal McCloy Jr., remains in a coma.

Federal and state inspectors are still investigating the causes of the fatal disaster, but the mine had a long record of safety violations, including repeated roof falls and failure to reduce explosive gases and materials. Reports by MSHA inspectors reveal a pattern of criminal negligence by the management of the Sago Mine, including the falsification of safety reports.

The fire at the Alma Mine underscores how endemic safety violations are throughout the entire industry and how state and federal authorities have abandoned any serious enforcement against these deadly conditions. The coal operators are enjoying record profits from rising prices and demand and deregulation of the industry by the Bush administration and “coal-friendly” state governments, such as the one led by Manchin.

In addition to sharing a record of safety violations, there are several other connections between the Sago Mine disaster and this most recent one. New York billionaire financier Wilbur L. Ross—the owner of International Coal Group, which runs the Sago Mine—recently teamed up with Massey Corp. to buy several nonunion mines in Appalachia. Ross also hired former executives of Massey Energy, including CEO Bennett K. Hatfield, to manage his operations, including the Sago Mine.

Massey Energy has a long history of attacking the conditions of coal miners. The company played a central role in the union-busting drive of the 1980s against the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). After refusing to sign the national labor agreement in 1984, Massey shut down several operations and then reopened them under the ownership of one or another of its subsidiaries in order to operate them on a nonunion basis. This led to a bitter strike by 2,000 miners in Pennsylvania, Kentucky and West Virginia, during which time the company hired paramilitary thugs to break the strike. Scores of miners were injured and arrested, and five were sentenced to long prison terms after being framed up by federal and state officials for the death of a nonunion coal truck driver.

The isolation and betrayal of the 14-month strike by the UMWA leadership led to the destruction of the union at Massey and contributed to the expansion of nonunion coal production throughout the former labor strongholds of southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky.

Massey Energy also enjoys close ties with the Bush administration and is a large contributor to the Republican Party. James H. “Buck” Harless, a West Virginia timber and coal magnate who played a key role in Bush’s narrow victory in the state in 2000, was rewarded with a place on Bush’s transition force on energy. He then joined Massey’s board of directors.

In October 2000, the company was responsible for a massive toxic-waste spill that polluted rivers and destroyed property in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia with 300 million gallons of coal slurry—thick waste from mining operations that contains arsenic and mercury.

Dave Lauriski, a former mining executive appointed by Bush to head of the MSHA, watered down the agency’s own findings, and Massey paid a token fine of \$110,000. Afterward, Jack Spadaro, a whistleblower at MSHA who was later fired, said, “I had never seen anything so corrupt and lawless in my entire career as what I saw regarding interference with a federal investigation of the most serious environmental disaster in the history of the Eastern United States.”

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