

Relatives of trapped Utah miners denounce mine owner, safety officials

By Barry Grey
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Relatives of six miners trapped 1,500 feet below ground at the Crandall Canyon mine in east central Utah made a statement to the press on Sunday, 13 days after the mine caved in, to express outrage over the decision of the mine owners and federal mine safety officials to effectively abandon attempts to rescue the men.

“We feel that they’ve given up and that they are just waiting for the six miners to expire,” said Sonny Olsen, a spokesman for the families. He read from a prepared statement as some 70 relatives of the trapped men stood behind him.

Olsen called for the drilling of a 36-inch wide hole through which a rescue capsule could be lowered. The hope was that the capsule could be used to extract the miners, or at least recover their bodies.

He denounced mine owner Robert Murray, Murray Energy Vice President Robert Moore and Robert Stickler, the director of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), for giving up on the families’ loved ones. The families’ statement followed a press conference earlier in the day in which Moore and Stickler said the miners were most likely dead and suggested that their bodies might never be recovered.

Moore added that the company was considering resuming mining in other parts of the mine, away from the section where the cave-in trapped the six miners on August 6.

Olsen pointed out that the families had heard nothing from mine owner Murray since Thursday, when three mine rescuers were killed in a second collapse. Since then, company and government officials have suspended any further efforts to tunnel to the site where they believe the trapped miners to be.

At the earlier press conference, Moore, with Stickler at his side, said a fourth hole drilled into the mountainside above the mine found that the air quality could not sustain life. “It’s likely these miners may not be found,” Moore said, reversing a statement he had made the previous night in which he insisted the effort at the mine remained a rescue—not recovery—operation.

The virtual abandonment of the rescue effort is the culmination of a tragedy that has exposed the real nature of social relations not only in the coalfields, but in American capitalist society as a whole. The six men buried beneath a mountain in a remote area of Utah and the three who died trying to rescue them are victims of a system dominated by the frenzied profit drive of corporate multi-millionaires like Robert Murray, who deem the lives of ordinary working people expendable and whose brutal practices are aided and abetted by a corrupt political establishment.

The cave-in that trapped Manuel Sanchez, 41, Kerry Allred, 58, Juan Carlos Payan, 22, Brandon Phillips, 24, Jose Luis Hernandez, 23, and Don Erickson, and led to the deaths of rescuers Brandon Kimber,

29, Dale Black and Gary Jensen, 53, was a disaster waiting to happen.

It was the product of a rush to capitalize on rising coal prices, the treachery and virtual collapse of the United Mine Workers union, and the policies of an administration dedicated to maximizing corporate profits by dismantling health and safety regulations. Murray, who runs the largest independent, family-held coal company in the United States, is a typical beneficiary of these conditions.

Known as Ohio’s coal king, Murray is a major donor to the Republican Party, with his company’s political action committee handing over \$200,000 to Republicans in the 2006 elections. He has testified before Congress on behalf of the National Mining Association to demand tax cuts and environmental and safety deregulation.

Murray’s largesse has been showered in particular on Republican politicians from coal producing states, such as Kentucky’s Mitch McConnell. Indicative of the corrupt nexus between mine bosses and the government is the fact that McConnell is married to Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, whose department oversees MSHA—the federal agency that is supposed to police mine owners and enforce health and safety regulations.

Murray has only recently expanded his operations in Utah, where large profits can be obtained by re-mining previously abandoned mines, using a highly risky method known as “retreat mining.” This involves miners removing or reducing pillars of coal that hold up mine shaft roofs—a source of cheap coal—deliberately precipitating roof falls as the miners retreat toward the mine entrance.

In Utah’s exceptionally deep mines, topped by mountains rising a third of a mile overhead, retreat mining is all the more dangerous, as the massive weight of the mountain bears down on increasingly unstable mine structures.

As the *Washington Post* reported on Monday, “In Crandall Canyon, the section the mine crew was working August 6 had already been harvested and abandoned by the previous owner. The mine’s new owner sent crews back in to gather more....the work the men were doing: bringing out the great chunks that held up the mine’s ceiling.

“The vast pillars of coal—often half or more of the coal in a workspace—is also called ‘pure profit,’ because there’s no expense in reaching it. ‘All you’ve got to do is knock it down and put it in your car,’ said Sue Ann Martell, director of the Western Mining and Railroad Museum in nearby Helper. ‘It’s the cheapest coal you can get.’”

A report issued by the National Institutes of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in 2003 stated that “mathematically a coal miner on a pillar recovery section was more than three times as likely to be fatally injured” in a roof collapse as workers in other parts of a mine.

“Pillar recovery continues to be one of the most hazardous activities in underground mining,” the report said.

According to the *Washington Post*, the dangers inherent in retreat mining were compounded at Crandall Canyon “because the miners were directed to extract coal not only from pillars, but from far larger pedestals known as ‘barrier pillars.’” The article continued: “Barriers are essentially the large sections of coal that divide one work section from another. The company’s plan, approved by the federal overseers, called for mining the section’s south barrier, while ‘pillars should be robbed as completely as is safe to promote good caving.’

“‘Everyone knows you don’t mess with barriers,’ said one mineworker, who asked not to be named for fear of being blackballed by employers.”

CNN reported that miners previously expressed concern about working in the area of the collapse—called 7 Belt—in the deepest part of the mine. The source, who requested anonymity, said in recent weeks the floors in that part of the mine had been “heaving,” or buckling, from intense pressure. He said that supervisors at the mine knew of the problem.

Last March, moreover, production was abandoned in a northern section of the mine after a sudden shift caused devastating damage.

From the first day of the Crandall Canyon tragedy, the utter servility of MSHA toward the coal bosses has been on display. Murray immediately assumed the role of public spokesman for both the rescue effort and the miners’ families, upstaging MSHA officials, who dared not contradict the owner.

The day after the cave-in, Murray gave a press conference in which he denounced environmental laws aimed at reducing green house gasses, chastised the press for publishing what he called malicious rumors spread by former mine safety officials and the United Mine Workers union, insisted repeatedly that the cave-in was the result of an earthquake for which he could not be held responsible, and denied that the miners were involved in retreat mining.

In fact, seismologists in Utah had already concluded that seismic shifts they had detected were the result of the mine collapse, and official records soon surfaced contradicting Murray’s denials of retreat mining.

Government records show that retreat mining has been done at the mine since 2005 and that in February of this year officials at the mine told government inspectors that they would be “pulling pillars” for several more years.

MSHA documents show that on June 15, MSHA District Manager Allyn Davis accepted a “roof control amendment” permitting retreat mining along the southern tunnels where the trapped men were working.

As part of his self-serving effort to wash his hands of any responsibility, Murray repeatedly asserted that the mining operations at Crandall Canyon had been approved by MSHA—a fact that only underscores the criminal complicity of the federal mine safety agency.

The owner left no doubt that he was calling the shots in the rescue effort, brushing aside concerns that the attempt to tunnel to the trapped miners was highly dangerous under conditions of repeated seismic “bumps” within the mine. He disappeared from public view only after last Thursday’s second cave-in that killed three rescuers and injured six more.

Murray went so far as to organize media expeditions deep into the mine to film the rescue effort. Ellen Smith, the editor of *Mine Safety and Health News*, who is by no means a harsh critic of the coal industry, wrote on August 10:

“As someone who has covered the health and safety side of this industry for 18 years... I could not believe what I was seeing on CNN news and reading on MSHA’s web site: a television crew and accompanying reporters, and family members, being allowed inside the mine to view the rescue operations...

“I was stunned. CNN reported they were at the mine rescue ‘face,’ a 30-minute, three-mile ride into the mine, where rescuers were removing the debris trying to get to those trapped men...

“I have defended the record of this mine from the first hour of this accident. I have defended the industry and the strides it has made since I began covering mine safety and health issues in 1989. But I will not defend what I see as high negligence and reckless disregard on the part of MSHA and Mr. Murray for allowing these people into the mine during this very serious rescue operation when ‘seismic activity’ continues to occur, and when no one knows why such a catastrophic failure occurred to begin with.”

The grim spectacle that has unfolded in Utah is a testament to the inhumanity and irrationality a social and political system that subordinates all considerations to the enrichment of a small financial elite. Despite immense developments in science and technology—which are used to vastly increase the productivity of miners and the profit of coal mine owners—health and safety conditions for miners remain backward and primitive. The wages of miners, in real terms, have declined by 20 percent since 1984.

Those who are obliged to toil hundreds and thousands of feet underground to scrape out a living lack elementary safety provisions: wireless communication devices that would enable them to signal their whereabouts; adequate emergency breathing apparatuses; emergency underground stations stocked with food, water, communications equipment and good air; proper escape passageways; etc.

None of this is provided for the simple reason that it would cut into the coal owners’ profits. And the government agency that is supposed to enforce health and safety standards, MSHA, is largely run by former mine bosses like MSHA Director Richard Stickler and based on a policy of “compliance assistance,” i.e., collusion with the owners’ drive for profits.

That such conditions continue is an indictment of the entire two-party political system, Democrats as well as Republicans. Since the Sago mine disaster that killed 12 West Virginia miners in 2006 and prompted the passage of the MINER Act later that year, nothing has really changed.

A serious change will come only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class against the profit system and the ruling elite it serves.

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