

A Deeper Look at Massey Coal Mine Deaths

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Struggles against unsafe conditions and the pressure of global energy markets remind us of new directions inspired by class struggles in the mine fields.

On April 5, 2010, 29 miners lost their lives in an underground methane gas explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in Montcoal, West Virginia in what I would argue is a clear case of “criminally negligent homicide.” Massey Energy, which owns the Upper Big Branch Mine, has a long record of sacrificing the lives and limbs of coal miners in pursuit of profit. Massey Energy also owned the Sago, West Virginia mine where 12 miners were killed in 2006. Since 1995, Massey’s Upper Big Branch Mine has been cited for “3,007” safety violations. According to the website of the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), “the mine’s operator, Massey subsidiary Performance Coal Co., allowed combustible materials to accumulate in the mine and failed to follow its own plan for maintaining adequate ventilation and controlling methane levels.”^[1] In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Massey Energy’s CEO, Don Blankenship, denied time off for miners to attend their friends’ funerals; rejected makeshift memorials outside the mine site; and according to family members, required a worker to go on shift even though the fate of a relative – one of the victims of the April 5 disaster – remained unknown at the time.

The nation’s fourth largest coal company, Richmond, Virginia-based Massey Energy made \$104 million last year, twice its 2008 profits, despite continued weak demand for coal. The profits were largely gained through access to foreign markets afforded by the processes of globalization and a vicious domestic cost-cutting campaign that included the elimination of jobs by cancelling shifts, shutting down higher-cost mines and “significant wage and benefit reductions,” according to Massey Energy financial statements.

To fully understand the tragedy of April 5, 2010, it is necessary to examine the historical and global context of Upper Big Branch Mine and the workers who have been subjected to the effects of globalization and down-sizing.

Globalization

At the same time, the company told investors it anticipated increasing production to 50 million tons and would increase profits by exporting more metallurgical coal to Asian steelmakers who were recovering faster than their European and US counterparts. Massey recently announced its first shipment of 80,000 tons of metallurgical coal to China and expects to sell about two million tons of coal to India this year. Thus the company intends to increase production and profits with fewer workers. These workers will be driven to produce even more, while safety regulations are largely disregarded.

It looks like Massey Energy will experience some setbacks to these plans due to the tragedy of the April 5th disaster. In addition to the justifiable wrongful death law suits against Massey Energy by the relatives of the deceased miners, there is an FBI probe, numerous government led investigations and a class action law suit against Massey Energy by its investors for violating federal securities laws by fraudulently claiming the Big Branch Mine was safe. It's entirely possible that Don Blankenship and possibly other high-ranking executives will be prosecuted for various crimes. "When capitalism encounters a crisis it has always proved willing to let its representatives to be devoured so long as attention is deflected from the inhumanity of capital itself."² We have seen these carnival like displays before during periods of crisis. When the dust has settled and the crocodile tears by our government and union representatives, led by Obama and United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President, Cecil Roberts, respectively, have dried up, it will be back to business as usual. More safety regulations will be passed as were passed during previous mining disasters and in which the lobbyists' for the mining companies will just as quickly find new loop holes. We still won't have the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) because while the UMWA would offer some measure of safety for the miners, the capitalists certainly don't want America's businesses to be unionized.

Just how much help the UMWA offers miners is questionable. The UMWA established roots in southern West Virginia during the bitter Mine Wars of the 1920s and 1930s. Today, it represents only a small number of active miners in West Virginia, Kentucky and other Appalachian states. All told, the active membership of the UMWA has plummeted from over 120,000 in 1978 to 14,152 at present. The UMWA's betrayal of the 1984-85 strike at what was then known as AT Massey Mine set the stage for a drastic rollback in the working conditions and living standards of coal miners throughout the industry. Historically, coal miners would carry out a national strike and shut down the entire industry until every operator signed the Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) agreement —following the principle that "an injury to one is an injury to all." In

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December 1983, however, newly elected UMWA President Richard Trumka (now the head of the AFL-CIO), and the rest of the union leadership abandoned the principle of “no contract, no work” and industry-wide strikes in favor of the policy of so-called selective strikes against individual companies.

The last time the tactic of selective strikes was used before the 1984-85 AT Massey Mine Strike, occurred during the historic Coal Miner’s General Strike of 1949-50.³ That strike lasted for nine months, but it took the action of the rank-and-file, which took over control of the strike, to finally win that struggle. That strike was the first strike against automated production, in the form of the continuous miner, which the miner’s dubbed the “man killer.”⁴ As Raya Dunayevskaya, the founder of the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism (M-H), in the US, who was a participant in that strike pointed out “This historic struggle signaled both the opposition of the workers to the *new stage of production*, which had taken the form of the continuous miner, and the opening of a whole *new stage of cognition*, when they faced the monster they called “the man killer” and asked: “What *kind* of labor should man do? Why should there be a division between mental and manual labor?”

In the period leading up to this historic strike, Dunayevskaya’s philosophic achievements included the formulation of the theory of State Capitalism using Marx’s *Capital* to prove production relations in Russia were based on the capitalist law of value *and* the first English translation of Lenin’s “Philosophic Notebooks.” Dunayevskaya was seeing links between the immediate post WWII period and Lenin’s search for philosophic new beginnings in 1914 with the collapse of the “Second International.” Seeing Lenin’s appreciation of Hegelian dialectics, I believe, would have deepened Dunayevskaya’s appreciation of Marx’s “philosophic moment” his 1844 *Humanist Essays* where he saw in Hegel’s dialectic of negativity “the moving and creating principle.” Witnessing the miners struggle for more human production relations deepened Dunayevskaya’s appreciation of Marx’s work in the 1860’s where his focus was increasingly on production relations and caused Marx to develop a totally new concept of theory and the restructuring of his greatest theoretical work “Capital” with its new focus in chapter one on production relations. These are just some of the high points of Dunayevskaya’s philosophic probing which when combined with her close relationship with the miners struggle, led to her “experiencing theory.” This in turn led to her seeing the *new stage of cognition* on the part of the miners as a new “movement from practice that was itself a form of theory” and her movement from theory meeting that movement from practice and reaching for philosophy. The unity of theory/practice, worker/intellectual. All of this led to the birth of Marxist-Humanism.

That magnificent historic Coal Miner's General Strike of 1949-50 where the miners created their own organization – the mass meeting, not only gave new meaning to labor solidarity by establishing direct support links among rank-and-file workers in coal, auto, steel and rubber in *defiance* of their own labor bureaucracy, led by UMWA President John L. Lewis. Their struggle when combined with deep philosophic probing on the part of Raya Dunayevskaya led to the birth of Marxist-Humanism. How did we get from there to Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Mine disaster of April 5, 2010?

I will only attempt to take up two courses of that development here, one of which I alluded to above with Trumka's selective strikes strategy. UMWA President John L. Lewis and the operators had clearly understood the revolutionary implications in the 1949-50 rank-and-file movement. That became the last great strike Lewis ever led, and never again did he directly involve the rank-in-file in any contract negotiations. All subsequent contract talks were held in secrecy, and the miners would first learn of new agreements when they were reported in the newspapers. Lewis made his peace with the coal operators by giving them the green light on automation – the continuous miner. What the miners had originally feared came true, within 10 years, from 1950 to 1960; the nation's miners were slashed from 500,000 to less than 175,000. The whole of Appalachia became a permanently depressed region.

Historical Legacy of Reaganism

Ronald Reagan, who reversed 50 years of New Deal legislation by breaking unions, cutting social welfare, and presiding over a massive redistribution of wealth from labor to capital set the stage for the series of mishandled disasters which ended with Hurricane Katrina. Beginning in the 1980's with Reagan (and his ideological twin in Britain, Margaret Thatcher), the orchestrated attack against organized workers focused primarily on two target areas: 1) the give backs, or concessions, of economic or work place gains that had been won over many decades of often brutal struggles against management; and 2) the elimination of those principles that have symbolized the history of unionism, such as brotherhood and sisterhood, seniority, the equality of treatment and the concept that an injury to one is an injury to all. The targeting of miners was high on their agenda as miners were known as the “shock troops” of the labor movement.

Worst of all are the “two-tier” wage agreements, wherein new hires are paid less than established employees for the same work. This not only creates a bitter divisiveness between new and older workers, but inevitably results in older workers being fired on every pretext to save employers labor costs by hiring lower paid new workers.

The overcoming of the legacy of Reaganism and Thatcher's "there is no alternative" (TINA) will require the overcoming of the division between mental and manual labor which is pivotal to the attainment of freedom for labor. As Raya Dunayevskaya pointed out in her 1957 work *Marxism and Freedom*: "The fundamental problem of true freedom remains: what type of labor can end the division between 'thinkers' and 'doers'? This is the innermost core of Marxism. The transformation of totalitarian society, on totally new beginnings, can have no other foundation than a new material life, a new kind of labor for the producer, the worker." When workers create their own organizations and take destiny in their own hands, then, and only then, will we be on the road that can lead us out of our crisis-ridden society.

Notes

¹ In true revolving door fashion between government and the industry it is supposed to oversee: "In 2002, President George W. Bush 'named former Massey Energy official Stanley Suboleski to the MSHA review commission that decides all legal matters under the Federal Mine Act,' and *cut 170 positions from MSHA*. Bush's MSHA chief, Dick Stickler, was a former manager of Beth Energy mines, which 'incur injury rates double the national average.' On October 21, 2009, the Senate confirmed President Barack Obama's choice to replace Stickler, Joe Main, a 'career union official and mine safety expert. *Massey's Suboleski is still an active review commissioner*' (emphasis mine).

² See Peter Hudis "Today's Global Financial/Economic Crisis and the Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg." www.usmarxisthumanists.org

³ See *The Coal Miners General Strike of 1949-50 and the Birth of Marxist-Humanism.*" A News & Letters Publication, June 17, 1984.

⁴ Unfortunately, that description is still valid today; two miners were killed last April 29, 2010 while operating a continuous miner at Dotiki Mine in Western Kentucky.