

THE MILITANT

Special supplement on
response to Utah mine disaster

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Minnesota meat packers fight drive against union

BY REBECCA WILLIAMSON

SOUTH ST. PAUL, Minnesota, August 8—Workers at Dakota Premium Foods, a beef slaughterhouse here, passed out copies of the newly reissued *Workers' Voice* last week as part of their efforts to beat a company campaign to decertify the union.

The *Workers' Voice* is a newsletter produced by members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 789 in the plant. It was “born through the fight to bring the union into Dakota Premium that broke out June 1, 2000, when we had a sit-down strike for seven and a half hours to demand the company slow down the line speed and stop forcing workers to work while injured,” said its most recent issue.

Local 789 members decided to reissue the newsletter as part of a campaign to defend their union from decertification. Leading up to the expiration of the union contract June 30, pro-company workers began circulating petitions to get rid of the union. Bosses have been organizing meetings, passing out anti-union propaganda, and stepping up harassment of pro-union workers, according to several workers in the plant.

The National Labor Relations Board told the union yesterday that they expect to decide in about two weeks whether to hold a decertification election.

Union supporters are visiting coworkers and working on the next edition of the *Workers' Voice*. They plan to distribute it to the more than 200 workers in the plant and use it to spread the word and win solidarity in the region.

Dakota worker Rosa Cruz said the newsletters “let the people know immediately what’s happening, like in the case of Miguel. What would happen to him if there was no union here?”

Cruz was referring to a company attack on union shop steward Miguel Gutiérrez yesterday. The company sent Gutiérrez home, saying he wasn’t working fast enough. But the company had been forcing him to work a job they know he can’t do because of a job-related injury. With support from his coworkers and the union representative, he won his job back.

“This is a way to prove to people that we have rights. That they have to treat you like a human being, not like an animal,” said Gutiérrez. “We have to make people see this reality, not the one that the company offers you.”

Rafael Espinoza, a Local 789 representative said, “People say if there’s no union, it’s going to be like it was before. They remember what it was like before—when someone got injured, it was a matter of days before they were gone.”

Rebecca Williamson is a trimmer at Dakota Premium Foods.

Safety is a union question! No miner has to die!

Answer bosses’ efforts to deflect blame for Utah mine cave-in

With six coal miners trapped after a cave-in at the Crandall Canyon (Genwal) coal mine near Huntington, Utah, we join with other workers in saying: “No miner has to die!” The truth must be told about the unsafe conditions facing miners at Crandall Canyon and elsewhere,

EDITORIAL

why such disasters are caused by bosses’ profit-driven disregard for safety, and why the only way to enforce safe conditions on the job is through workers organizing into unions.

To help get out the facts, we urge you to get this special four-page issue of the *Militant* into the hands of fellow workers and farmers as widely as possible.

Despite the statements by Murray
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AP/Rick Bowmer

Rescue workers exit a mine shaft at the Crandall Canyon mine outside Huntington, Utah, August 8. Six miners have been trapped inside since a massive cave-in August 6.

Utah miners, relatives speak out on unsafe conditions before cave-in

BY BILL ESTRADA
AND CHRIS HOEPPNER

HUNTINGTON, Utah, August 8—“I don’t think this was an earthquake and I’m not surprised this happened,” said César Sánchez in an interview today. His brother Manuel Sánchez is one of six coal miners trapped underground by a massive cave-in at the nonunion Crandall Canyon mine.

The cave-in happened at 2:48 a.m. on August 6. No communication has been established with the men, who are 3.4 miles from the mine entrance and 1,500 feet underground. As much as 2,000 feet of rock and debris are blocking rescue efforts.

The mine, also known in the area as Genwal, is located in Huntington Canyon.

In addition to Sánchez, trapped miners include Kerry Allred, Luis Hernández, Brandon Phillips, Carlos Payán, and Don Erickson. Four other miners escaped.

Miners say the company is pressuring them not to talk to anyone about what happened. Murray Energy Corp. CEO Robert Murray confirmed this at a press conference today.

But Sánchez’s family is speaking out. “Why are they telling us not to speak to the press?” asked María Sánchez, his sister. “What are they afraid of?”

A Crandall Canyon miner who had worked the shift before the collapse occurred told the *Militant* that the company had been “retreat mining.” He asked to remain anonymous.

Retreat mining is considered among the most dangerous mining

methods. In this procedure, after an area is mined, workers take out the last bits of coal from the pillars that hold up the roof. This causes the roof to cave in.

The company denies they were retreat mining at the time of the collapse.

“This was caused by an earthquake,” Murray insists. “It was a natural disaster.” But scientists disagree.

“[A]ll of the available evidence indicates that the mine collapse itself was the earthquake,” Lee Siegel, a

University of Utah science news specialist, told the Associated Press.

Siegel also said that in Utah’s recorded history, an earthquake has never triggered a mine collapse or a cave-in. “However, there have been numerous cases where the collapse was recorded as an earthquake,” he said.

“If seismic activity may have instantly killed them, that is in the hands of the Lord,” Murray said at a press conference yesterday.

“Murray has shown that he does not
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‘Militant’ has long record of championing miners’ struggles

BY SAM MANUEL

For decades the *Militant* has been part of struggles by miners to organize and strengthen their unions to fight for safe working conditions.

The July 4, 1931, issue championed a strike of coal miners in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio to expand the union in face of wage cuts and starvation conditions.

The *Militant* provided weekly coverage of the strikes led by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in 1977–78 and 1981.

It had prominent coverage of the 2003–2006 battle for unionization at the Co-Op mine in Utah. That struggle, led by miners who were majority Mexican-born, showed that fights for legalization of immigrants and unionization are intertwined.

“Unionize the Mines! Build the

UMWA! No miner has to die!” read the front-page editorial headline in the Feb. 6, 2006 issue. That was the paper’s response to the deaths of 12 miners at the Sago Mine in West Virginia.

Another five miners were killed in an explosion at the Darby Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky, in May 2006. In all, 47 miners died on the job that year. Hundreds subscribed to the *Militant* in mining towns throughout Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky.

The paper has also solidarized with miners’ struggles worldwide.

In March 2006 *Militant* reporters covered the strike of 4,000 miners at the two largest copper mines in Mexico against unsafe working conditions. In February that year, 65 miners died in a coal mine owned by the same company, Grupo Mexico.

No miner has to die! Safety is a union issue!

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Energy Corp. officials that the fate of the six miners trapped underground is “in the Lord’s hands,” responsibility for these men’s lives lies with the bosses. The Crandall Canyon mine was cited for more than 300 safety violations in the last three years.

Mine operators, however, routinely get just a slap on the wrist for violating even the most basic safety rules. The fine that Crandall Canyon owners had to pay for not having sufficient exits for the second time in two years was just \$60, about as much as a parking ticket. No wonder that just weeks before the cave-in, Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) inspectors found the same problem in the mine for the third time in two years.

As many of us know from experience, dangerous working conditions are the norm, not the exception, for coal miners and many other workers. In their cutthroat competition for greater productivity and profits, bosses are pushing us to work faster, for longer hours, and cutting corners on safety. Working people cannot rely on MSHA or other agencies of the government, which acts on behalf of the wealthy employing class. Having an effective union is the only way to push back the bosses from forcing us to do whatever they want to get out production.

Miners in Utah and around the world have a powerful example to follow in the struggle that unfolded in Huntington Canyon between 2003 and 2006. Workers at the Co-Op mine, less than 10 miles up the road from Crandall Canyon, fought a determined battle to organize into the United Mine Workers of America. Central to the demands of the miners was safer working conditions.

The miners at Co-Op, in their majority immigrants from Mexico, won broad solidarity in the labor movement. The impact of their struggle was felt throughout the region, including among nonunion miners, who began discussing how to change their job conditions. The miners defeated repeated attacks by the bosses, including a retaliatory lawsuit. While they did not win a union local, they demonstrated the power working people have when we organize and fight together. Today many former Co-Op miners are working in other mines in the region and some are part of the rescue operations at Crandall Canyon.

Many of the coal miners in the region, including three of those trapped in the Huntington mine, are immigrants from Mexico or Central America. This underscores the fact that the fight for unions is intertwined with the struggle to legalize all immigrant workers—immediately, without conditions. Bosses try to use workers’ legal status to intimidate them into accepting dangerous conditions, low wages, and abuse. Organizing immigrants into the unions and fighting for legal status for all will help strengthen the entire labor movement.

The struggle at Co-Op was similar in character to the fight that forged a union in 2000 at the Dakota Premium

Foods slaughterhouse in South St. Paul, Minnesota. Workers put their stamp on both struggles from the start. Today meat packers at Dakota are resisting a campaign by the bosses to decertify their union, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 789. Before they had a union, bosses routinely forced them to work while injured. Conditions became increasingly dangerous as the bosses jacked up the line speed. Winning a union local there was a first step toward safer working conditions. Supporting their struggle to defend their union goes hand in hand with supporting miners in Utah in the fight for job safety today.

When workers have union safety committees in every mine and plant, they can use union power to walk off the job if bosses try to impose life-threatening conditions. Coal miners can refuse to work if roofs and ribs are inadequately secured. Packinghouse workers can stop the line if the speed endangers their lives and health.

The labor movement needs to act on the basis that not a single miner has to die. Help get out the truth about the bosses’ responsibility for the Huntington disaster. Build solidarity with the Dakota workers’ fight to defend their union! Support the struggles by miners, meat packers, and others to unionize!

Unsafe conditions before cave-in

Continued from front page
care about the miners and their families,” said María Sánchez. She said he walked out of a meeting earlier today briefing the family members on the rescue effort after they began to express frustration with the company’s approach. “There was no translation for the Spanish-speaking families,”

she added. Three of the trapped miners are from Mexico.

The men’s families are being sequestered at Canyon View Junior High School in Huntington. The entire building has now been leased by Murray Energy. The Emery County sheriff’s department and company are restricting access to relatives.

Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) inspectors issued 325 safety violations against Crandall Canyon since January 2004. Last month, inspectors cited them for not having at least two separate emergency escapeways.

It was the third time in less than two years the mine was cited for the same violation. Last year’s fine was just \$60.

The conditions at Crandall Canyon are not substantially different from other mines in the area, according to miners.

From 2005 to 2006, Ved Dookhun worked at Crandall Canyon’s sister mine, Tower, outside of Price, Utah. “They were always concerned with just getting out as much coal as they could,” he said in an interview. In 2006, a longwall operator was killed at that mine when a large piece of coal struck him in the face after an explosion. “Production didn’t stop even when the shifts were changing.

“If you were injured, you’d lose your safety bonus, so a lot of workers just didn’t report injuries,” added Dookhun.

All but one of the 10 active mines in Utah are nonunion.

“In a nonunion operation, you’re restricted in what you can do to reinforce safety,” Bob Butero, Region 4 director of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), said in an interview today. “Under a UMWA contract, a miner has the right to remove yourself from the danger.”

Alyson Kennedy and Peter Brandli contributed to this article.

Eyewitness report from 1984 Utah mine disaster

The last major mine disaster in Emery County, Utah, was a fire at the Wilberg mine outside of Orangeville. Below we reprint an excerpt from the Jan. 11, 1985, Militant, providing an eyewitness account of this event. The authors of the articles were both coal miners who participated in the union rescue and relief efforts. Cecelia Moriarity worked at the Wilberg mine where the fire occurred.

BY JOE GEISER AND CECELIA MORIARITY

PRICE, Utah—Nineteen members of UMWA Local 2176, and eight company executives and foremen, were killed by a fire that started Dec. 19, 1984, at the Wilberg mine outside Orangeville, Utah. The mine is located in the main coal-producing region in the southeastern part of the state.

The bodies of the 26 men and one woman remain inside the mine despite attempts to rescue them. On December 23 rescue teams were evacuated from the mine on the order of federal mine inspectors as explosive gases reached a dangerous level. On December 29 the mine portals were sealed in an effort to bring under control the fire that has raged since December 19.

The dead miners were all working in a section of the mine where a longwall, the most modern and mechanized machine for producing coal, was in use. The company was attempting to achieve a 24-hour world production record at the time of the fire.

Emery Mining has tried to cover up its responsibility for the disaster, claiming the fire probably started as a result of a mechanical failure on the conveyor-belt system that brings coal out of the mine.

However, at a press conference December 28 at UMWA Local 2176 headquarters in Orangeville, eyewitness testimony was presented by two union members who discovered the fire. Their story contradicts the company version.

Speaking at the press conference were UMWA members Alex Tidwell and Clinton Price. They are beltmen, whose job is to maintain the conveyor belt and keep the area clean of coal dust accumulation that could lead to a fire.

According to Tidwell and Price, the fire broke out near an electrical cable in the fresh-air tunnel leading to the longwall section, not on the conveyor belt.

The two men said the phone nearest the fire was not working so they were unable to immediately call for help. As the fire spread to the conveyor belt motor, an automatic foam system that should have been activated to put out the fire failed to work. “It just bubbled,” they said.

Earlier last fall, Mine Safety and Health Administration inspectors had found caved-in coal and rock blocking an escape route. Instead of ordering Emery to clean up the cave-in, MSHA issued the company a variance, which is a permit to keep operating despite a safety violation. Because the cave-in was never removed, there were only two—instead of the normal three—exits available to miners in the area. The fire broke out on one escape route and quickly burned through to a second exit, blocking both. The third escapeway was blocked by the cave-in. The miners on the longwall were thus trapped.

THE MILITANT

Safety is a union question!

The ‘Militant’ is a voice for working people fighting for safe conditions and dignity on the job, from the mines to the meatpacking plants. It’s a way for workers to learn about each other’s struggles.

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