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Explosions kill 31 energy workers

By Tim Wheeler

Families and co-workers of six oil workers killed in a refinery explosion here April 2 were mourning their dead when three days later another explosion, this one in a West Virginia coal mine killed 25 miners, a deadly toll of 31 energy workers in less than a week.

President Obama offered condolences during an Easter Monday prayer service to the families of the coal miners killed in an explosion at an Massey Energy-owned mine April 5.

United Mine Worker President Cecil Roberts said, "The hearts and prayers of all UMWA members are with the families of those lost today at Performance Coal Company's Upper Big Branch mine. We are also praying for the safe rescue of those still missing and for the safety of the courageous mine rescue team members. They are putting their lives on the line, entering a highly dangerous mine to bring any survivors to safety."

Indeed, explosive gases drove the rescue teams back when they tried to enter the West Virginia mine. Roberts noted that the Upper Big Branch Mine is non-union, yet the UMWA sent "highly trained and skilled UMWA personnel to the immediate vicinity of the mine and they stand ready to offer any assistance they can to the families and the rescuers at this terrible and anxious



time."

Massey employs 5,400 workers at 35 underground and 12 surface mines that produce 40 million tons of coal annually. Environmentalists have been arrested 14 times at Massey mines protesting mountaintop removal mining that is devastating the beauty of southern Appalachia.

On Jan. 16, 2006, a fire at Massey's Aracoma Alma # 1 mine in Logan County, W.Va. killed two

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miners. The widows filed a lawsuit when investigators found that fire hydrants in the mine were dry and the hose couplings did not match the water lines. The widow of Don Bragg, one of those killed, told the judge "Massey executives much farther up the line expected the Alma mine to emphasize production over the safety of the coal min-

Explosive gases drove the rescue teams back when they tried to enter the West Virginia mine.

ers inside.”

The judge ordered Massey to pay \$4.2 million in criminal and civil penalties, the largest such fine in coal mining history.

In Washington State, the United Steelworkers of America rushed its Emergency Response Team to Anacortes to console the families of the dead and assist the families of the severely burned workers in the refinery explosion. The union also sent Kim Nibarger, the union’s top health and safety expert, to join in the investigation of the disaster. Nibarger is a former refinery worker who was employed at another refinery in Anacortes. The refinery is owned by Tesoro, a corporation with “a history of serious health and safety violations,” the union charged in a statement.

The Washington State Department of Labor fined Tesoro \$85,700 a year ago for 17 life or safety threatening violations. Inspectors found 150 deficiencies in Tesoro’s safe work practices.

“All of us are mourning the death of these six workers,” said USWA spokesperson Lynne Baker. “All of those who died were members of the Steelworkers or had been members for many years. It happened just before Easter weekend when these workers would have been at home with their children having Easter egg hunts.” Two of the workers killed were women and several of the victims had young children.

The Steelworkers, she added, “plan to get to the bottom of what caused this explosion. We’re looking for the root cause that is not always apparent on the surface.” She said the USWA negotiated in its last contract with the oil refinery industry a \$500,000 benefit for the survivors of any worker killed on the job.



Tim Wheeler writes for the People’s World.

Finance reform can spur job creation

By PW Editorial Board

The nation’s labor movement says the risky practices on Wall Street were behind the destruction of 11 million jobs in America and demands that Wall Street pay to create the jobs it destroyed.

The task is how to make them pay. While curbs on outrageous pay for CEOs are helpful they will not do the trick. What we need to solve the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression is the most sweeping finance reform since the 1930s so Wall Street won’t be able to go back to business as usual.

Wall Street and its GOP backers want to scale back if not scuttle the most important reforms. There are some indications that their strategy might be to agree with the Democrats on setting up a Consumer Protection Agency in exchange for watering down other important measures.

Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin’s staff recently met with leaders of groups active in the fight for finance reform. What they said was, in ef-

fect, given the anti-Wall Street mood of the country there are likely to be a few Republicans willing to break a filibuster. Democrats may actually have the power to rein in Wall Street. Will they use that power?

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka gave labor’s take on financial reform during a recent MSNBC interview. “Wall Street gave \$145 billion in bonuses last year that aren’t anywhere geared to performance or job creation. We’re saying that you destroyed the jobs and now you should pay to create the jobs. Part of it is a higher tax on carried interest. Hedge fund people are able to get away with a lower interest rate than what my 85-year-old mother paid in taxes.”

The AFL-CIO says a tiny tax of .03% on all financial transactions would yield many billions of dollars that could be used for job creation.

“I intend to be on Wall Street April 29 with thousands of my friends to take the message straight to the executives,” Trumka said.



Even organizations and individuals critical of the bill have acknowledged its importance and far-reaching implications.

Retirees jump-start convention

By Jim Lane

The Alliance for Retired Americans rocked their first plenary session with appearances by AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Liz Shuler, Labor Department Secretary Hilda Solis, and Senate Majority leader Harry Reid. The convention is from April 5 to 9th in Las Vegas.

Alliance President Barbara Easterling outlined the main concerns of the four-day convention.

- Fight to get out the truth about the benefits of the new health care bill;
- Stand together against any proposed cuts in Social Security;
- Learn every communication method, including social networking and Twitter;
- Gear up to win the 2010 elections.

Executive Director Ed Coyle gave a sobering report on the current voting patterns of most Americans over 65 years old.

- They voted for Bush in 2004;
- They voted for McCain in 2008;
- They currently have the lowest approval rating for the Obama administration of any age demographic;
- They tended to oppose health care reform;
- They continue to be the targets of “sustained and coordinated, downright mean, misinformation drives.”

Although every other speaker gave the ARA retirees credit for saving Social Security from the George Bush privatization plan and for defending the new health care bill from those intent on



wrecking it, Coyle’s points were frank: “So you see, we have our work cut out for us,” he concluded.

AFL-CIO leader Liz Shuler expressed her elation over the passage of health care reform. Like everyone else, she recognized the indispensable role of the retirees’ organization. Shuler also talked extensively about the need for all activists to embrace, listen to, and understand, the “millennia generation.”

Shuler said that today’s youth oppose corrupt financiers and supports government regulation. Specifically, the AFL-CIO leader urged retirees to help make a success of the labor federation’s “Young Workers’ Summit” in June in Washington.

Labor Secretary Hilda Solis talked about job safety and stressed the importance of defending the health care bill and retiree pensions.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid received the ARA’s Leadership Award with great humility. He said that he treasured his award because Senator Ted Kennedy had been its first recipient.

Reid, like every other speaker, was proud of the new health care bill. He said, “There were 750,000 personal bankruptcies in 2008. Many were caused by the health care crisis. No longer in America, if you get sick or hurt, will you have to file for bankruptcy!”

AFL-CIO leader Liz Shuler expressed her elation over the passage of health care reform.

Immigrant vet faces deportation

By Joe Sims

Up to 1,000 foreign born veterans, permanent residents, but not yet citizens are sitting in 350 detention centers across the country awaiting deportation.

One such detainee is Rohan Coombs, a Jamaican-born Marine from Brooklyn who fought in Operation Desert Storm. Coombs who suffers from PTSD, was convicted of marijuana possession. After serving time in prison, Coombs was turned over to immigration authorities.

Coombs who joined the Marines in 1988 was told by commanding officers that “he was a citizen for saying the oath to the military and for being told he was property of the U.S. and that made him a citizen. Now the judge in his case is telling him he is not a citizen and that he should be deported back to a country he hasn’t been to in over 30 years.”

His case and others are being taken up by the National Lawyers Guild and veteran advocacy groups. The Lawyers Guild is arguing “that veterans should be considered U.S. “nationals” because when they enlist in the military, they have to take an oath of loyalty almost exactly like the oath people take to become naturalized citizens.”

Legislation, HR 2988, has been introduced into Congress, to address the problem. The bill would amend “the United States Code to clearly state that U.S. military service members are non-citizen nationals and petition the Department of Homeland Security to stay their removal from the United States of America.”

Un llamado a la justicia en los campos tabacaleros

By John Wojcik

Los hombres me encontraron un par de botas de goma y un rollo de bolsas de plástico que yo convertí en un poncho para evitar que el rocío de la mañana empapara mi ropa.

“Mi trabajo comenzó a las 7 am, recogiendo capullos de flores, retoños y el deshierbe.

“Se arranca la parte alta del capullo de la flor y los retoños se recogen de las hojas. Los retoños lucen como pequeños brotes de lechuga romana.

“Uno de mis compañeros de trabajo, ‘El Niño’, se divorció pero sigue siendo un padre responsable, presutando su apoyo a sus cuatro hijos. Él quiere que los niños reciban educación para que escapen de una vida de trabajos sin futuro en México. Su estadía en los EE.UU. por tanto tiempo destruyó su matrimonio, pero en México la falta de trabajo no le dió otra opción que inscribirse en el programa de trabajadores huéspedes H2A “.

Baldemar Velásquez, fundador y presidente de la Comisión Organizadora de Trabajo Agrícola (FLOC), describió en esta forma el primero de los siete días que pasó el mes pasado como campesino anónimo en la labor del campo. Su objetivo era la de ver de primera mano la situación de los trabajadores del tabaco en Carolina del Norte, en donde se les paga US\$7 por día.

“El sol se sentía como un lanzallamas en la espalda. Los hombres lucían derrotados, respirando por la boca abierta. La mitad superior de mi pantalón estaba empapado en sudor a las 8:30 am. Es fácil ver por qué los hombres pueden morir de un ataque de corazón”.

Los trabajadores del tabaco, dirigida por la FLOC y acompañados por partidarios de los sindicatos y las organizaciones comunitarias, marcharon por las calles de Winston-Salem, Carolina del Norte ayer para exigir un trato justo y justicia.

Dicen ellos que marcharon porque ya hace 3 años que Susan Ivey, director general de Reynolds, la segunda mayor compañía de tabaco de la nación, se niega de plano a reunirse con la FLOC para poner fin a la situación abusiva en los campos de tabaco.

Los trabajadores del tabaco viven en la pobreza, y sufren tanto de la intoxicación de la nicotina como de los efectos de pesticidas y productos químicos letales.

“Las condiciones que estos trabajadores enfrentan no sólo son una tragedia, sino una desgracia moral oculta a la mayoría de los estadounidenses”, dijo Velásquez, prometiendo que “FLOC hará campaña hasta que Reynolds Tobacco se compromete a unirse con nosotros para hacer frente a esta vergüenza nacional”.

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