Mine safety story remains the same

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President Obama promised to strengthen oversight of the mining industry last week in the wake of the devastating explosion at West Virginia's Upper Big Branch mine. The accident was a reminder that in the coal industry, profits have always been more important than miners. Half a century ago, similar safety violations resulted in the Knox Mine disaster near Pittston, Pa.

The Knox Coal Co. mined some of the Pennsylvania coal region's deepest and highest-quality coal. Although the larger Pennsylvania Coal Co. controlled the processing, transportation, and sale of the coal, it contracted the mining out to Knox, a nonunion company, to avoid safety risks, high costs, and labor conflicts.

Knox boosted profits by violating the union wage rate, mining in off-limits areas, and using unsafe practices.

Its most heinous violation was ignoring a requirement that any mining under the Susquehanna River be at least 35 feet deep. Ranking officials allowed drilling under the river until the roof of the mine was just a few feet thick, despite the known presence of a heavy layer of sand, clay, and gravel beneath the riverbed. Miners were afraid to report violations lest they lose their jobs.

On Jan. 22, 1959, the massive weight of the deposits broke through, and the Susquehanna's waters emptied into the mine, killing 12. Subsequent state and federal investigations uncovered a sweetheart deal between Knox officials and organized crime. Bribing union officials allowed the company to violate contract provisions on pay, safety, and work conditions, leading to the disaster.

The accident prompted Rep. Dan Flood of Northeastern Pennsylvania to sponsor what became the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969. It required annual inspections of every underground coal mine and dramatically increased federal enforcement powers in the mines. It also established fines for all violations and criminal penalties for knowing and willful violations.

Flood's measure was strengthened in the 1970s by the creation of the Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration and by protections for miners reporting violations.

Still, all of these regulations failed to prevent the West Virginia explosion, which authorities believe was caused by high levels of methane gas and a buildup of combustible coal dust. Virginia-based Massey Energy Co., which operates the mine through a nonunion subsidiary, was cited for 124 violations this year alone, with $188,769 in proposed penalties. The infractions were related to air quality, ventilation, equipment testing, and accumulation of combustible materials, according to records.

But mining is one of the few high-paying jobs in West Virginia, and miners remain reluctant to challenge operators for fear of losing their jobs.

There is a correlation between profits and negligence. As production at Upper Big Branch has increased, so, too, have the violations. In 2008, the mine produced 363,923 tons of coal and received 197 citations. Last year, it produced 1.2 million tons of coal and racked up 515 violations. The company apparently preferred to pay the fines and retain a favorable profit margin — until the recent explosion.

Don't expect much to change, either. Nearly half of the country's power is generated by coal, a multimillion-dollar business. It's a shame mining companies don't do more to protect the miners who risk their lives to make that business possible.

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