

Have We Learned Anything?

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In February 2006, it will have been 34 years since an impoundment on Buffalo Creek broke and washed out several communities, took 125 lives, injured 1,121 and left 4000 people homeless. For those of you who don't know, or don't remember, that impoundment had been "built" (actually dumped) in violation of several state and federal laws; the company (Pittston Coal) knew that the amount of rainfall had weakened the dam; and the official in charge drove out of the hollow shortly before it burst.

The comparisons to today are obvious. The impoundments created by mountaintop removal are larger and more toxic than the impoundment at Buffalo Creek. Like the situation in Logan County, regulatory agencies have been lax in enforcement or frank about the fact that they simply don't know what a "safe" impoundment would consist of.

But there are major differences between what happened in 1972 and what is happening today. In 1972 there was an "energy crisis" and more and younger miners were being hired. The vast majority of mines were union, and that union (the United Mineworkers of America) was caught up in a major reform movement called the Miners for Democracy (MFD). The Buffalo Creek disaster further exposed the corruption of a union that traded thousands of safety-related grievances for a few cents more of pay and turned their backs on the deteriorating conditions in the mines.

A man named Sim Howze, a miner widely respected by both his men and the community in which he lived, headed the local union at Buffalo Creek. He was working his shift when the dam burst and only managed to get back to the hollow by the backroads. During that time he had no idea whether his family was alive or dead. Fortunately his family had scrambled up the side of the mountain, and had watched as houses, cars, and churches flowed down the valley. The victims of the flood didn't just drown; they were mangled and skinned by the water that contained the end results of deep mining.

Like the Sago disaster in January 2006, the Buffalo Creek flood received major media attention. And then they went away. But the organized miners did not forget. The miners began to take matters into their own hands. Miners knew that the complicated, long and expensive grievance procedures might or might not vindicate their complaints, but meanwhile, how many more would die or be injured? The miners began to walk out when they encountered unsafe conditions. These "wildcat strikes" spread through out the coalfields. By law the union had to "enforce" the contract, which meant telling to miners to go back to work.

The companies began to go into federal courts and ask the judges to enforce the contract by issuing injunctions. Failure to obey would mean thousands of dollars in fines for locals, the district, and the national union. Miners ignored the injunctions.

Roving picket lines spread throughout the coalfields and in 1975 the local at Buffalo Creek walked out. Sim Howze was told by the judge to tell his men to cross the picket lines and return to work. Many union officials would tell the judge they would, but would convey to their men that they didn't agree. Howze, however, would not lie to the judge. He said he could not tell unions members to cross picket lines and spoke eloquently to the judge of why the picket line and the union were essential to the well

being of his men. The judge sentenced him to jail for contempt. Within two days, there were major demonstrations by miners in the streets of Charleston and the strike spread even further. The judge let Sim Howze out of jail.

By 1976 the striking activity had idled over 120,000 coal miners across the nation and brought the industry to its knees. Finally the courts agreed to stop acting as the enforcer for the industry, and a new contract toughened safety provisions.

We can see immediately how the situation today is different. The once powerful and proud UMWA is a shadow of its former self. The largest mountain top removal mines are nonunion, as are many of the smaller underground mines like Sago. The well-organized networks of miners that created the largest wildcat of the century no longer exist. But what remains the same is the fact that miners' health and safety cannot be confined to just the conditions at the mine. Coal mining, as practiced today, is a threat to the health and safety of COMMUNITY. Just as Buffalo Creek demonstrated that it is not possible to separate the miners' concerns from the concerns of the families and neighbors, so today we must recognize that as long as coal mining creates a danger to the people of the community we must act united to ensure the safety of ALL.