

EDITORIAL OPINION

78 Mute Witnesses For Reform

The two unavoidable salient facts about the history of coal mining in the United States are that it has taken an appalling toll of men and that almost no one has cared enough to prevent the toll.

It will be small comfort to the widows and children of 78 miners entombed when Consol No. 9 mine in West Virginia was ordered sealed last week following America's latest mine disaster. Consolidation Coal Company president John Corcoran gave the sealing order to cut off fires raging below.

"The cumulative evidence shows without question that human life is not possible where the men (trapped by an explosion in the mine) would be located," Corcoran said.

But even as the mine was sealed new agitation was developing for mine safety reforms.

The history of mine safety reforms, at least, lent more than usual credence to the traditional post-disaster pieties about "doing better next time." The time now seemed right for revolutionary changes.

The United States Bureau of Mines originally came into existence in 1910 after the worst mine gas explosion in this country—an underground blast in the soft coal fields of West Virginia that killed 362 men (more or less—exact records were not kept then of men underground) at Monongah Mines Nos. 6 and 8 on Dec. 6, 1907.

For the next 34 years—for the next 295

mine explosions and 7,301 miners' deaths by mutilation, fire or suffocation—the bureau was not even empowered to send its inspectors on mine owners' property, except by consent.

It was not until 1941, after more than 12,000 mine explosion deaths, that the bureau finally won the power to inspect—and then its only power to correct was publicity, a stream of press releases reporting the grossest violations. They received scant attention.

The industry up to then had won its legislative battles by crying "states' rights"—let the states inspect the mines—and by gravely predicting that stricter safety standards would bankrupt it.

It took two southern Illinois disasters—Centralia No. 5 in 1947, a methane and coal dust explosion that killed 111 miners, and Orient No. 2, at West Frankfort, with a loss of 119 men in 1951—to overcome the resistance of coal state Congressmen, many of them in the industry's pocket, and pass the Federal Coal Mine Safety Act of 1952.

That act is still the basic law, and although there have been four explosion-free years since its passage—1955, 1956, 1964 and 1967—the death toll in the 15 years it has been in effect, including the most recent major disaster on Nov. 20 at the No. 9 mine of Consolidation Coal Company at Farmington, W. Va., is 376 dead, hundreds of others injured and disabled.

The explosions and fires that shattered and scorched consol's "modern" mine in West Virginia caused shock waves in Washington. Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall said bluntly that not only had the Bureau of Mines not done nearly enough research in applying known safety technology to the hostile atmosphere of mines, but that both the industry and the United Mine Workers had failed in their responsibilities, too.

Saying, "I don't think that it is acceptable that we simply shrug our shoulders and say, 'well, we are going to have disasters of his type from time to time'," Udall took action.

Udall summoned to a "wide open" public conference on coal mine safety, to be held in Washington Dec. 12, all the critics, all the crippled, angry human castoffs of the coal industry.

The most numerous safety violations in coal mines involve accumulations of explosive coal dust—an even greater explosion hazard in gassy mines such as Consol No. 9. The Bureau's own manual states:

"Coal dust, loose coal, coal and other combustible material shall not be permitted to accumulate in dangerous quantities in active underground workings of mines."

The question is: Was Consol No. 9 in clear violation of that regulation, and if so, why was nothing done about it?

Lads Give All

Five teenage lads in Bedford, Indiana, are giving their all in the cause of justice these days, but they aren't too happy about it. The band of youths thought it quite a prank to hoist 30 dozen eggs from a local supermarket. The eggs weren't stolen for personal monetary gain. The boys merely used them as missiles to be thrown at passing vehicles. They admitted to shelling some 41 cars and 3 school buses.

Judge Donald A. Erdman could have sentenced the crew to a few days or nights in the pokey, or merely fined them. But he felt that he would not bring about any lasting impression that way. His alternative was, in our opinion, truly a triumph for justice. The Judge ordered: "1. The washing (within the next 30 days) of 41 cars and three buses admittedly 'egged' by the five youths Wednesday night. 2. Work in the City Street Department for the next five Saturdays in a row raking leaves and painting. 3. An 8 p.m. curfew calling for the five to be off the streets and home by 8:00 each night for the next 30 consecutive days, unless in