

The 5 Most Toxic Energy Companies and How They Control Our Politics

Written by Tara Lohan | AlterNet
Monday, 21 November 2011 07:02



Energy companies continue to rake in massive profits. They use this wealth to leverage elections, write legislation, scale back regulations and escape accountability.

Four days after the April 5, 2010 explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia, the 300 family members keeping vigil finally learned that the last of the missing miners had been found and there were no survivors among them. The explosion killed 29 men, and severely injured one. The mine was run by Performance Coal Company, a subsidiary of Massey Energy. Massey's Chairman Bobby R. Inman called it a "[natural disaster](#)," but it was anything but natural.

Like the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf that would steal the nation's attention (and 11 lives) just two weeks later, Upper Big Branch was the inevitable outcome of regulators turning a blind eye to a greedy corporate culture that puts profit above human lives. But this is nothing new. Coal, oil and gas companies in the U.S. have been getting away with murder for years. Sometimes it is just less obvious -- the slow poisoning of our air, water and food; the deterioration of human health, the loss of homes and jobs, the obliteration of whole communities and ecosystems.

Even as the burning of fossil fuels pushes the planet toward the brink, these energy companies continue to rake in massive profits. They use this wealth to leverage elections, write legislation, scale back regulations and escape accountability. The Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) has found that, "Individuals and political action committees affiliated with oil and gas companies have donated [\\$238.7 million to candidates](#) and parties since the 1990 election cycle, 75 percent of which has gone to Republicans." Although Republicans have won big from the industry, CRP found that [Obama received \\$884,000](#) from the oil and gas industry during his 2008 campaign for the presidency.

In 2010 the oil and gas industry shelled out more than [\\$145 million on lobbying](#) and the mining industry spent nearly \$30 million.

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Which energy companies are the worst offenders? We'll look at how much they spend on lobbying, how many lobbyists they hire, how many "revolving door" personnel pass between government and industry, how much they contribute to political campaigns (whether through individual donations, their political action committees, or "soft money" to support the party), and the effect of their greed on human lives and the environment.

While the list of energy companies that could be included is long, here are five whose egregious actions deserve national attention.

5. Massey Energy

As you'll read below, there are energy companies that are far bigger than Massey, that throw around hundreds of millions more in lobbying and have more political muscle. But Massey does have something that has earned it a spot on this list: a track record of environmental abuse and safety failures that rival the big players. And it is not afraid to jump into playing politics either, including buying off a judicial election to ensure a win in court.

At the time of the Upper Big Branch disaster in 2010, Massey was the fourth largest coal company in the country and the largest operating in Appalachia. While Upper Big Branch was the most deadly mining accident in the U.S. in the last 40 years, it was not the only time Massey's negligence has resulted in fatalities. Two miners were killed in a fire in the company's Aracoma Alma Mine in January 2006. It was later determined the men lost their lives because of Massey's "reckless disregard" for safety, according to a report. In fact, an investigation afterward by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) doled out more than [1,300 citations](#) for violating safety regulations.

Upper Big Branch and Aracoma were not isolated incidents for Massey; simply business as usual. A study done by American University found that between 2000 and 2010 Massey had the [worst fatality record](#) of any U.S. coal company. During that decade 54 miners lost their lives, compared to just six miners who died between 2000 and 2009 at Peabody, the largest coal company in the country. Massey earned over 62,000 violations during that decade, 25,000 of which were deemed "significant and substantial." The company also raked in the most fines at nearly \$50 million.

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