

Two workers killed in Ohio coal mine collapse

Jerry White
28 September 1999

Two coal miners were killed and three others injured last Friday in a roof collapse in an underground mine scheduled to close in southeastern Ohio. William Florence, 49, and Gerald Elbe, 57, were removing drainage pipes 700 feet below the surface when the ceiling collapsed and crushed them. The accident occurred at Consolidation Coal Company's Powhatan No. 4 mine, in Clarington, Ohio, just across the Ohio River from West Virginia.

Funerals for the two miners are scheduled for Wednesday.

A week before the roof collapse the mine had been declared safe by inspectors from the Ohio Division of Mines and Reclamation. Another routine inspection was scheduled for Friday, and the inspector was en route to the mine when its roof collapsed, the state agency said. State and company officials said they have not determined the cause of the collapse.

The Powhatan mine was one of the state's largest mines until Consol announced its shutdown in March. Only a small crew of 34 miners are on duty to remove coal and equipment before the mine is permanently shut down. Company officials say the 28-year-old mine, which once employed hundreds of workers, is being shut because environmental concerns have reduced the demand for high-sulfur coal.

Pittsburgh-based Consol, the fourth largest coal company in the US, is currently downsizing in order to boost its falling share values. Wall Street firms, such as Merrill Lynch and JP Morgan, have advised the company to close older mines and shift production to more cost-effective sites. The company, which is majority-owned by German conglomerate RWE AG and DuPont, has suffered a sharp fall in share values because of the unseasonably warm weather and the economic crisis in Asia, which has depressed exports around the world.

The miners who were killed were members of the

United Mine Workers of America. The union has made no public comments about safety conditions at the mine. This is not surprising since the UMWA jointly oversees health and safety with management, and if any safety violations were present, it would be complicit in the death and injury of the miners. Moreover, the UMWA has directly contributed to the erosion of safety in the mines by collaborating with management to boost productivity, cut costs and increase profits.

The same month Consol announced the shutdown of the Powhatan mine, the company said it would lay off another 550 workers at three mines in West Virginia and Virginia. Workers at one northern West Virginia mine got the bad news when they arrived at work and found a note saying the mine was closed. At the time UMWA District 31 President Rich Eddy said, "we produce a tremendous amount of coal and break all kinds of tonnage records, and this is the thanks we get."

In 1998 there were 29 fatalities in the nation's coal mines. Thirteen were the result of roof falls, the leading cause of coal mining accidents. Twenty-two of the fatal coal mining accidents occurred at underground mines, while seven took place at surface mines. The total number of deaths in US coal mines has fallen for three consecutive years, but the lower numbers do not indicate improved safety as much as they do the continued shutdown of mines and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs. Since the early 1980s UMWA membership has fallen from 120,000 to well below 40,000 miners today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact