

Coal mine explosion kills three in West Virginia

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Three workers were killed and three others injured in an explosion January 22 at a coal mine near Cameron, West Virginia, in the state's northern panhandle. The six men, contract employees of Central Cambria Drilling Co., were digging an air shaft at Consol Energy's McElroy Mine when a blast occurred at 1 a.m. at the bottom of a 940-foot-deep shaft.

David Abel, 47; Richard Mount, 37; and Harry P. Roush III, 23; were killed in the explosion. Benjamin Bair, 23, was hospitalized in critical condition, with second-degree burns all over his body, multiple fractures, internal damage to his organs and inhalation injuries. Crew boss Richard Brumley, 51, was also hospitalized in serious condition, with second-degree burns, puncture wounds and head injuries. A third man, Paul Meyer, 28, was treated for minor injuries and released from the hospital.

After the blast, Meyer managed to signal fellow workers on the surface and was hoisted up inside a five-foot bucket attached by cables to a crane. He then accompanied rescue workers down the smoking shaft in order to bring up the two remaining survivors.

Cameron Mayor Thomas Stern, a coal miner for 29 years and a member of the safety committee at the McElroy Mine, told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that people working at the explosion site described it as "gruesome." Stern said local residents had been frightened that the explosion might have reached the hundreds of miners working at the mine. A Consol spokesperson, however, said the blast occurred 1,200 feet from the active mine operations.

Tests near the explosion site indicate the blast was caused by methane, an odorless, colorless and highly flammable gas that forms in underground pockets. The winter months have traditionally been the deadliest time of year in coal mines because large drops in

barometric pressure allow methane to seep from inactive parts of a mine into travelways and work areas, where an explosive mixture of air and methane can come into contact with an ignition source. The cold weather also allows cool, dry air entering mines to become warm, drawing moisture from work areas and drying out coal dust, which adds to the explosive hazard.

Fearing another explosion, rescue workers took nearly 12 hours to bring the bodies of the dead men to the surface. Lee Skinner, a drill company worker who waited near the accident site to hear the names of the dead, told the *Post-Gazette*, "These were good, hardworking boys trying to make a living for their families." He added, "It's very dangerous work. You use dynamite to blast and there is methane to deal with."

Although monitors are used to measure methane, Skinner told the newspaper, pockets of methane can get trapped in "bottlenecks" in the rock and cause explosions. "Methane gas has to be totally ventilated at all times," he said. "You can't smell it. You can't see it. It's like electricity."

State and federal mine safety officials have not determined what ignited the explosion, but suggested that it might have been an oxygen-acetylene torch, which the men were using to remove metal forms around the shaft. The blast could also have been triggered by dynamite and other explosives used by the workers to cut through the rock.

Consol—the nation's third largest coal company, with \$2.3 billion in assets—contracted Central Cambria, despite its poor safety record. US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) records show the Ebensburg, Pennsylvania-based contractor had a rate of nonfatal injuries higher than the national average in six

of the last eight years. Last year its injury rate was more than double the national average; in 2000, it was five times the national average, and in 1998, almost ten times the average.

MSHA records show the company had filed 52 accident and injury reports since 1992 while working for Consol Energy on air shaft jobs at its McElroy, Eighty-Four, Bailey and Enlow Fork mines, according to the *Post-Gazette*. The contractor filed a total of 69 accident-injury reports with MSHA during that 10-year period.

Tom Hoffman, a Consol spokesman, told the Pittsburgh newspaper, "We are aware they had a recent year in which their accident rate was much higher than in other years, but generally they met our criteria. There are only two or three companies in the area that do this type of ventilation shaft work. We've used them in other air shaft projects and found their work to be satisfactory."

The new air shaft is part of its expansion of the McElroy mine, which produces up to 7 million tons of coal annually and employs 500 miners—members of the United Mine Workers of America. After the explosion Consol issued a press release assuring its investors that no damage had been done to its mining operations and that it still expected to report net profits. "Production was not disrupted and continues on a normal schedule. The incident is not expected to have a material effect on the company," the company stated.

Doug Conaway, director of the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training, said state inspectors had visited the construction site at the end of October and beginning of November and found no safety violations and issued no citations. According to the *Post-Gazette*, Conaway claimed he wasn't aware of any of the accidents or injuries reported to the federal mine safety agency, even though five occurred around the time state mine officials visited the site.

The Bush administration, working closely with the energy conglomerates, has cut funding for the Mine Safety and Health Administration, undermining the already lax regulations on the coal industry. Bush has also selected pro-business figures to head MSHA and its enforcement divisions.

Despite the falling number of working miners, the number of fatalities continues at an alarming rate. Twenty-eight miners died in 1999; 38 in 2000; 42 in

200; and 27 in 2002. The three miners killed in West Virginia were the first fatalities this year.

Far from opposing the assault on safety and working conditions, the United Mine Workers union has collaborated with Consol and the other coal companies to boost productivity and cut costs. The union's refusal to defend jobs has left mining communities throughout the Appalachian coalfields in a depression-like state. With an official unemployment rate around 6.2 percent, West Virginia has one of the highest jobless rates in the nation. Moreover, in the last 20 years the inflation-adjusted median wage in the state has fallen by 22 percent.

This has left young workers with little choice but to accept the lowest-paid and most dangerous jobs. Harry Roush, the 23-year-old killed in this week's explosion, was typical of young people in the area. After leaving high school, he held jobs in construction, as a butcher and in lawn-sprinkler installations before finding work with Cambria Drilling last March.



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