

Death toll continues to rise in US coal mines

Kentucky miner crushed to death in roof collapse

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A 44-year-old coal miner was crushed to death in an east Kentucky mine Tuesday, just over a week after 12 miners were killed in a West Virginia mine explosion. Cornelius Yates of Shelbiana was working about 900 feet inside Maverick Mining LLC's No. 1 mine near Pikeville when a large rock broke loose from the mine roof and killed him, according to state mine safety authorities.

Yates, who had 15 years of mining experience, was a roof bolter and was the lead of a four-man team inside the mine at the time of the accident, according to the local newspaper, the *Appalachian News-Express*. There were no other reported injuries.

Mark York, a spokesman for the state's Environmental and Public Protection Cabinet (EPPC), said mining officials were notified just after 3 p.m. about the roof fall, which was 20 feet long, 14 feet wide and three feet thick. "When we started it was a rescue mission, but it quickly turned into a recovery mission once we were inside," York said.

Records from the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) indicate the mine, which is operated by James H. Blevins, has received 114 citations since November 2004. On November 29 last year the mine received a violation requiring protection against falls from the mine roof, sides and mining area.

To date, not all citations have been settled or assessed a fine. The company has paid \$1,788, or 26 percent, of \$6,925 in proposed fines, records show. The mine had a regular safety and health inspection January 3, records show. The inspection's end-date is listed as "ongoing," but no violations were issued.

Yates was the second Kentucky miner killed within the space of two weeks. On December 30, David

Morris, Jr., 29, died of injuries in Harlan County when a mining car struck him as he stood next to the vehicle he used to shuttle coal through the mine. The incident occurred 4,100 feet underground at the H&D Mining Inc. No. 3 mine near Cumberland.

Judy Morris, 52, the young miner's stepmother, said he was eager to leave the mines after four years. He had worked only a few months at the H&D mine, she said. "He didn't like being in the mines at all, because they're so dangerous," Judy Morris said. "He had problems with his back and wanted a job where he wouldn't have to worry about getting hurt."

Morris was married and had two young sons, four years and three months, his stepmother said. "He was such a wonderful father and such a wonderful human being."

Nine miners died in Kentucky last year, according to MSHA. As in the coalfields of West Virginia, economic desperation has driven many young workers into the dangerous occupation. The median household income in Pike County, where Cornelius Yates was killed Tuesday, is only \$23,930, just over half the national figure of \$42,000.

Eastern Kentucky, and Harlan and Pike counties in particular, was once a stronghold of the United Mine Workers of America—with tens of thousands of unionized coal miners. The betrayal of such struggles as the 1984-85 AT Massey and 1989-90 Pittston strikes by the UMWA bureaucracy, which included the abandonment of five Massey miners framed up by federal authorities for the murder of a nonunion coal truck driver, contributed to the discrediting and collapse of the organization in the region. Today there are only 271 active UMWA miners in eastern

Kentucky, compared to 12,620 nonunion miners, according to statistics compiled by the US government's Energy Information Administration.

The death of another coal miner—coming on the heels of the Sago Mine disaster—was treated as a rather unimportant event by the US media. The *New York Times*, for example, relegated its report on the Kentucky miner's death to a one-inch wire service story buried on the bottom corner of page 16.

Only a week ago, the *Times* editors wrote: "Just as Hurricane Katrina forced Americans to look at the face of lingering poverty and racism, this mining tragedy should focus us all on another forgotten, mistreated corner of society." The treatment of this latest tragedy makes clear that the *Times* and the rest of the news media have a rather short attention span when it comes to exposing the realities of working class life.

The media is rushing to "forget" the plight of the coal miners once again just as industry spokesmen and coalfield politicians are complaining that all the attention on the Sago Mine disaster has undermined their efforts to recruit a new generation of coal miners. With nearly half of the current workforce expected to retire in five to seven years, and rising coal prices sending Appalachian mining companies scrambling to produce more coal, the explosion at the West Virginia mine has undercut the effort by company and government officials to downplay the dangers of the industry.

Bill Caylor, president of the Kentucky Coal Association, said the lack of trained miners has hindered the mining industry. Part of the problem, he told the Associated Press, is the false perception that coal mining is more dangerous than other occupations; a perception, he said, that was fueled by the death of 12 miners in West Virginia. In an effort to defend the safety record of the mining industry, Caylor insisted that manufacturing and construction workers were much more likely to die or get sick or injured on the job.

Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, said he didn't expect the tragedy in his state to stop people from entering the mining industry, any more than the war in Iraq has stopped enlistments in the military. All but acknowledging that economic hardship was the greatest boon for both the military and the mining industry, Raney said, "I think there's a lot

of similarity when you compare [mining] to the military. You have certain people who will go to the military and make a career of it, yet the news is full of stories about threatening environments."

According to the web site *GI Jobs Online*, coal companies are actively seeking out returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan to work in the mines, particularly trained mechanics, electricians and engineers. In an article entitled, "Coal labor shortage means big money for military job seekers," returning soldiers are promised high pay and assured that "despite its reputation, mining is also getting safer."



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