

Two more West Virginia coal miners killed

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Another two West Virginia coal miners were killed in two separate accidents Wednesday, bringing the death toll in the state to 16 miners in a little over a month since the year began. The two deaths, both in Boone County in the southern part of the state, follow the loss of 12 miners after a January 2 explosion at the Sago Mine in Upshur County and the deaths of two others following a conveyor belt fire January 20 at the Alma Mine in Logan County.

The names of the victims have not yet been released, but federal safety officials reported that a miner was killed at Long Branch Energy's No. 18 Tunnel Mine near Wharton, when a wall support came loose and collapsed on him. "The rib popped out of from the side of the mine," said Dirk Fillpot, a spokesman for the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

During the first nine months of 2005 eight workers were injured at the Long Branch mine, which employs 59 workers, according to MSHA. This is almost triple the national average for non-fatal injuries. Last year federal inspectors issued 50 citations against the mine—which is organized by the United Mine Workers union—19 of which were considered "significant and substantial."

At Black Castle Surface Mine near Williams Mountain, a bulldozer driver was killed after hitting a gas well or a gas line that burst into flames, according to state and federal officials. The nonunion mine belongs to a subsidiary of Massey Energy, the fourth largest coal producer in the US, which also owns the Alma Mine, where two miners died last month. According to federal records, in 2005 the Elk Run Black Castle Surface Mine was penalized \$14,830 for 61 safety violations, up from \$3,641 for 28 violations in 2004.

While officials did not release any details, a third miner was also seriously injured Wednesday. Kanawha County emergency officials said an ambulance was

dispatched to pick up a miner with a possible fractured leg at the Fork Creek Coal Co. Mine No. 1, just west of state capital of Charleston.

With public anger growing over the mounting fatalities and the lack of safety regulation in the mines, West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin convened a private meeting with industry officials Wednesday and issued a public statement calling on coal operators to halt production until safety checks on mines and equipment could be carried out. He also ordered the acceleration of federal and state inspections of West Virginia's 350 underground and 200 surface mines "as soon as possible."

At a hastily called press conference at the Capitol, Manchin said, "We're going to check for unsafe conditions, and we're going to correct any unsafe conditions before we mine another lump of coal." Asked what impact halting production would have on industry and state revenues, Manchin declared, "I'm worried about the miners' safety right now. The economy will still be there."

The actual impact of Manchin's pronouncement—which was presented in the media as an unprecedented shutdown of the West Virginia mining industry—turned out to be minimal, at best. Administration officials and coal industry representatives quickly said production would not actually stop Thursday at most of the state's mines. According to the *Charleston Gazette*, Lara Ramsburg, the governor's spokeswoman, confirmed that Manchin did not order production halted, something she said he does not have the authority to do in any event.

In the end, Manchin's "standdown for safety" turned out to be nothing more than a request that mine operators delay the start of production in order to lecture miners about the importance of safe practices. Bill Rainy, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, said their members would abide by the

governor's request and expected that mine owners could accomplish safety checks in a few hours or less. A spokesman for Consol Energy added, "It's a good time to remind everybody that there's a right way and a safe way to do things."

In a news release the United Mine Workers union lent its support to the governor, adding that it was the union's understanding that Manchin "called for a 'review of safety procedures' at the beginning of each shift, after which work will continue." Union president Cecil Roberts acknowledged that the governor would have to rely on the word of nonunion operators on whether or not the safety checks were actually performed.

According to reports Thursday, some companies took as little as a half-hour "time out" before sending miners back to work.

A similar approach was taken by the Bush administration, whose top mine safety official urged coal mines nationwide to conduct safety and training sessions on Monday for workers at the beginning of each shift. "I am asking miners and management at every mine operation to do the right thing: take one hour out for safety's sake this Monday," said David Dye, the acting MSHA chief.

Budget cuts, staff reductions, token fines for safety violations and a "business-friendly" atmosphere promoted by top MSHA officials have all contributed to the prevalence of unsafe working conditions in West Virginia and US mines. The Bush administration has promoted the deregulation of the industry to reward coal companies like Massey, which were major contributors to the president's reelection campaign, and is pushing through the nomination of Richard Stickler, a former coal boss with a record of horrendous safety enforcement, to become the permanent head of MSHA.

Manchin and other leading Democrats, such as West Virginia Senators Jay Rockefeller and Robert Byrd, are no less committed to defending the interests of the coal industry. Whatever half-measures and proposals they have made on the state and federal level regarding safety will always take into account the bottom line of the coal operators.

Since the beginning of the year a total of 18 miners have died nationwide—including 16 in West Virginia, one in Kentucky and one in Utah. In all of 2005 there were 22 mining fatalities nationally, including a record

low of three in West Virginia, which is second only to Wyoming in coal production.

West Virginia's higher death toll corresponds with an increase in coal output being driven by rising prices for highly valuable Central Appalachian coal, which have more than doubled since 2003. Over the last two years West Virginia production has increased from 146 million tons to 153 million tons, although mining employment has fallen by 3,000 jobs, or 20 percent. The opening up of long-unused mines along with maximizing production from a smaller workforce has led inevitably to the sacrifice of safety standards.

At the end of January two of America's "Big Four" coal producers posted big fourth-quarter profits, surpassing Wall Street expectations. St. Louis-based Peabody Coal netted \$162 million and Pittsburgh-based Consol's earnings rose to \$87 million.



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