

Slaughter in US coal industry continues

Five miners killed in Kentucky explosion

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Five coal miners were killed in an explosion that ripped through an eastern Kentucky mine early Saturday morning. The fatal blast took place at about 1:00 a.m. at the Darby Mine No. 1 in Harlan County, killing five of the six men on a maintenance crew at the mine, located near the Virginia border.

Killed in the disaster were: Amon Brock, 51, of Closplint; Jimmy D. Lee, 33, of Wallins Creek; Roy Middleton, 35, of Evarts; George William Petra, 49, of Kenvir; and Paris Thomas Jr., 53, of Evarts. Only one man—Paul Ledford—survived. Initial reports indicate that the blast—which was so powerful that debris was blown hundreds of yards from the mine entrance—was caused by methane gas, which appears to have ignited in the production area after leaking from a sealed, unused section of the mine.

Coming just months after the explosion at the Sago Mine—which killed 12 West Virginia coal miners on January 2—the Harlan County disaster is an indictment of the entire political and corporate establishment in the United States. Behind all the crocodile tears for the miners' families by Democratic and Republican politicians and promises for improved safety, the fact is that miners' lives and limbs continue to be ground up to feed the industry boom that is producing huge profits for the coal bosses.

In the first five months of this year, 31 US coal mines have been killed in explosions, roof falls and other accidents, exceeding the number of fatalities in all of 2005, when 22 miners died. Since the beginning of the year 10 miners have been killed in Kentucky alone, including two workers killed at two different mines on April 20 and 21.

The continuing slaughter of miners underscores how ineffectual have been the measures announced by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration

(MSHA) and the Kentucky state government after the Sago explosion. For all intents and purposes these measures have been for public consumption and have been delayed in Washington and various state capitals to make sure they are acceptable to demands of the coal companies for increased production and profits. For its part, the US media, which provided rare coverage to the conditions of Appalachian miners and their families during and after the Sago disaster, has all but ignored this latest tragedy. The *New York Times*, for example, buried its coverage of the Harlan County explosion on page 28.

That this tragedy occurred in Harlan County is particularly significant. The area was long a center of the struggles of coal miners against the coal operators and the state authorities who defended them. In the 1930s the county became known as “Bloody Harlan” throughout the US, after miners fought the violent resistance of the coal bosses, their hired gunmen and the National Guard to organize the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in the area. In 1973-74 Harlan County miners waged a 13-month strike at Duke Energy's Brookside Mine, once again defying armed thugs, to win union recognition and fight for decent wages and safety conditions.

By the 1980s, however, the UMWA abandoned these militant traditions and deliberately betrayed several bitter strikes, in order to further its policy of labor-management collaboration and its political alliance with the Democratic Party. The betrayal of the 1984-85 AT Massey and the 1989-90 Pittston strikes, which included the abandonment of miners framed up and even murdered by the coal bosses, transformed eastern Kentucky and other former union strongholds into areas where coal miners confronted conditions of exploitation not seen since the 1930s. Today there are

only 271 UMWA miners in eastern Kentucky, compared to 12,620 nonunion miners, according to statistics compiled by the US government's Energy Information Administration.

After more than two decades of mass unemployment and poverty in the coalfields, and after successfully driving down the wages and conditions of the miners, producing coal has once again become a very profitable enterprise, particularly as coal prices have risen sharply in recent years. While production has greatly increased mine operators have limited the number of workers they have hired in order to contain costs, and those that are hired are sent into the mines with little or no training.

The opening of small, low-cost and unsafe pits—long known among miners as “dog-holes”—has become profitable in this climate. The Darby Mine, where Saturday's tragedy occurred, employs 34 miners who produced 118,052 tons of coal last year. According to MSHA records, the Darby mine was cited for 10 safety violations in April, four of them “serious and substantial,” an indication that an employer willfully ignored safety precautions. These included allowing the accumulation of flammable coal dust and a problem with water sprinklers and fire warning system on the coal belt.

Since being taken over by its current operator—Ralph Napier—in May 2001, there have been three very serious accidents caused by collapsing roofs and walls. Over the last five years, the mine has been issued 257 citations by MSHA investigators for which the company has been fined just \$27,651 or a little over \$100 per violation. As in the case of the Sago Mine, these fines are little more than the cost of doing business for the coal operators, who have little to fear from federal and state authorities that either reduce the penalties or do nothing to collect them.

In a revealing comment, Ray McKinney, the acting director of MSHA, said the number of fines at the Darby Mine “would probably be normal” for the industry. This only underscores the imminent danger facing thousands of miners and that the fact that under the Bush administration MSHA has all but ended any serious regulation of the mining industry.

Statements from friends and relatives point to the economic desperation in eastern Kentucky that forces workers into the dangerous occupation. Mary

Middleton, whose husband Roy, 35, was one of the miners killed, told the Associated Press that he had been working in the mines since he was 18. “He thought about coming out of the mines but we have two kids. It was a job to make a living,” said the widow. Other family members recounted the unsafe conditions that have become a fact of life for miners. Paris Thomas's wife, Tilda, told the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, “every night before he left (for work) I wouldn't say goodbye. I'd just say see you in the morning and he'd say, ‘I hope so.’”

The lone survivor of the disaster, Paul Ledford, said that at least two of the miners who died had survived the initial blast and tried to escape. The miners crawled through a 48-inch high tunnel, trying to make their way through dense smoke and dust to reach the mine entrance some 3,000 to 5,000 feet away. Ledford passed out twice on his way out of the mine, once for two-and-a-half hours and again for 30 or 40 minutes, according to his brother's account.

Preliminary autopsy reports indicated that three of the miners—Middleton, Petra, and Thomas—died of smoke inhalation and carbon monoxide poisoning, while Brock and Lee were killed by the explosion.

Ledford, who sustained burns to his face and chest and had the skin on his knees worn away, was treated at a nearby hospital and released Saturday evening. According to his brother his oxygen pack—known as a Self-Contained, Self Rescuer or SCSR—provided clean air for only five minutes, instead of the one hour that the device is supposed to provide. The sole survivor of the Sago explosion, Randal McCloy Jr., made a similar complaint about the oxygen packs the trapped men had, saying that several failed to work.

In a telling example of the state of mining in the US and its tragic impact on mining communities, Ledford's brother David was killed in a mining accident in 1991, while another brother, Jeff, was permanently disabled from a rock fall in 1996.



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