Two more US coal miners killed in Kentucky and West Virginia

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The almost daily toll of deaths and injuries in US coal mines continued this week with the loss of two young miners in Kentucky and West Virginia, just days after five coal miners were killed in a mine explosion in eastern Kentucky. The latest deaths bring the number of coal industry fatalities in the first five months of the year to 33, well over the 22 miners killed in all of 2005.

On Tuesday, Steven T. Bryant, 23, of Louisa, Kentucky, was killed when his water truck went over an embankment and crashed at an open-pit mine in Breathitt County. Bryant had only been on the job for about a month at the Risner Branch No. 2 Mine and was normally employed as a rock truck driver, according to Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher.

The death of the young worker—the sixth fatality in a Kentucky mine in four days and the eleventh in the state so far this year—took place as relatives and co-workers were burying the five miners killed May 20 at the Darby Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky.

The following day Todd Lewis Upton, 34, an underground scoop operator, was killed at the Sycamore No. 2 Mine in Harrison County, West Virginia, when he was apparently hit in the head by a wooden board while operating equipment underground. Like the miner killed on the previous day, Upton had only recently been hired and had worked at the mine less than eight months.

The West Virginia mine is owned by Wolf Run Mining Co., a subsidiary of International Coal Group. ICG is a growing player in the US coal industry, and also operates the Sago Mine, where 12 coal miners were killed January 2. ICG owner Wilbur Ross—a billionaire New York financier— has made a fortune in buying and selling bankrupt steel mills, auto parts factories, coal mines and other industrial assets. His Ashland, Kentucky-based company, which was formed in 2004 after the acquisition of Horizon Natural Resources, once the nation's fourth largest coal company, controls 916 million tons of coal reserves and has 11 mining complexes in Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia and Illinois.

After the fatal blast at Sago forced the temporary shutdown of the mine, some of its employees were transferred to Sycamore, located 56 miles away. Like the Sago Mine, Sycamore has been repeatedly cited for gross violations of federal safety and health regulations, even though it just began operating during the second quarter of 2005. The federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has cited the mine 49 times since January, for violations ranging from not having the proper guards on machinery to failing to control explosive coal dust. According to MSHA records the mine has a non-fatal injury rate that is nearly a third higher than the national average for similar operations.

Last month MSHA inspectors cited Sycamore five times for "unwarrantable failure," a citation that means mine managers have "engaged in aggravated conduct constituting more than ordinary negligence." According to the *Charleston Gazette*, two of the five orders concerned alleged failure to conduct proper pre-shift safety examinations, a violation that was also cited repeatedly at the Sago Mine and prompted the criminal prosecution of one former Sago foreman. The other three Sycamore violations concerned alleged failure to control the accumulation of combustible materials underground, according to MSHA records.

These miserable working conditions—which have already caused the death of a miner—have promoted no more than a slap on the wrist from state and federal mine inspectors, who under the Bush administration have been ordered to "partner" with the coal bosses. For its egregious safety violations at the Sycamore

Mine, ICG has been assessed $4,494 in federal penalties since 2005 and has paid $1,250.

With rising coal prices and profits, coal operators have rushed to hire new younger, workers and send them into the mines with little, if any, training. In many cases more experienced laid-off miners have stayed away from these jobs because of the low pay, lack of safety, and nonunion conditions. After more than two decades of high unemployment, mine owners are counting on the economic desperation in Appalachia to fill their demand for labor. At the same time some operators have called for relaxing restrictions on immigration in order to lure low-wage workers from Mexico and elsewhere to the coalfields.

After more than two decades of betrayed strikes and complicity with the mine bosses and Democratic Party to cut labor costs, there is little more than a shell left of the United Mine Workers union in its former strongholds of West Virginia and Kentucky. Having driven down wages and decimated working conditions—fought for by coal miners for decades—the coal operators are sharply driving up production while only marginally increasing employment in the industry. This factor, along with years of safety deregulation by both big-business parties, has made these tragedies inevitable.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported Thursday that federal mining officials in 1999 were so concerned about the coal miners' inability to use complicated emergency oxygen respirators that they proposed increasing training sessions to four times a year, instead of once a year—a mandate that is also generally ignored. A 130-page draft of the proposed safety standard obtained by the *Post* described multiple mine disasters or near-disasters where the lack of training rendered the oxygen packs practically useless, including a 1984 fire at a Utah mine where 27 miners died. The device in question was the CSE SR-100 "Self-Contained, Self-Rescuer," a 20-year-old technology that was used by miners at Sago and Darby Mine No. 1 in Kentucky, where five miners died last weekend.

In addition to the fact that the respirators only provide, at best, one hour of clean air, surviving miners at Sago and Darby complained that the oxygen packs have failed operate in many cases.

Although the questionable reliability of the respirators and the lack of training was well understood to have caused the deaths of dozens of miners, the proposal to increase inspections of the respirators and training for the miners, as well as mandating mine owners to store additional supplies of oxygen in the mines, was not made by then-head of MSHA David McAteer until near the end of the Clinton administration, in 1999. The proposed change was then not acted upon, and once the Bush administration took over in 2001 the proposed standard was scrapped because of "resource constraints and changing safety and health regulatory priorities."