Four days after Utah mine collapse

Three miners killed in Indiana

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Three workers were killed at a southern Indiana coal mine Friday morning when they fell from a large bucket carrying them down a newly constructed ventilation shaft. The miners plunged 500 feet to their deaths.

The mine in Princeton, Indiana, about 30 miles north of Evansville, is owned by Alliance Resource Partners, the fourth largest coal producer in the eastern United States. The Gibson Coal Mine was the scene of another fatality shortly after it opened in 2000 when a miner was crushed by machinery.

According to the local *Princeton Daily Clarion*, the men were employed by Frontier-Kemper Constructors, which was digging a new portal for the mine. The *Clarion* reported that people doing such construction work have to be licensed miners, but it is not clear whether the deceased had received such training.

Construction company officials said they did not know how the men fell out of the bucket. Delton Gooch, a worker for Frontier-Kemper, explained that the "basket" goes all the way down to the work deck, which moves up and down to different levels within the shaft. When the accident occurred, he said, the work deck was suspended only 10 feet from the bottom of the 500-foot shaft.

He said the basket is "as big as an SUV," and said it could comfortably hold 6-10 men.

Gooch, who leads one of the construction teams, said when he heard about the accident he immediately started phoning his family to let them know he was OK. The possibility of an accident is something the workers think of regularly, Gooch told the local newspaper.

"If you're doing [the job] and you're going up and down in the bucket every day, of course the possibility crosses your mind," he said.

The death of the three mine workers in Indiana brings to thirteen the total number of fatalities in the nation's coal mines so far this year. Since January 2006, 60 miners have been killed, including 12 at the Sago Mine in West Virginia 19 months ago.

The deadly accident in Indiana occurred just four days after the collapse of the Crandall Canyon Mine in central Utah. There has been no contact with the six miners trapped in the mine Monday morning and hope is fading that they will be found alive.

Late Thursday night rescuers completed drilling a borehole into the area—1,500 feet below the surface—where the miners were believed to have last been. A microphone dropped into the cavity detected no sound.

Richard Stickler of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) said initial tests suggested there may have been sufficient oxygen levels in the cavity for the miners to survive. Tests conducted overnight and released Friday, however, found oxygen levels at 7 percent, too low to sustain life. Potentially deadly levels of carbon monoxide were also found.

Sticker could not explain the discrepancy with the initial findings. He speculated that the new results might indicate that the drill hole drifted as it was being bored and ended up in a different part of the mine. "We should all continue to have hope," Stickler said at a news conference.

The miners were carrying no more than two hours of oxygen in the self-contained self-rescuers they each wear on their belts. Despite claims by company officials to the contrary, there is no way of knowing the exact location of the miners because the primitive communication system used at the Crandall Mine—and most US mines—was destroyed by the mine collapse.

Robert Murray, whose company is co-owner of the Crandall Canyon Mine, continues to insist a magnitude

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3.9 earthquake caused the mine collapse. He claims that at least ten aftershocks have been recorded and that seismic activity was responsible for wiping out more than 300 feet of progress in digging toward the trapped miners and temporarily halting rescue efforts.

Murray says it will take at least another week to dig through the fallen coal and rock to reach the trapped men.

Seismologists and geophysicists have repeatedly disputed these claims, saying the seismic activity they measured was due to the mine's collapse, not the other way around.

On Thursday, University of California-Berkeley seismologist Douglas Dreger said the shaking bore the signature of a collapse and "not a tectonic earthquake." Experts have said the "aftershocks" could be the rock adjusting after the collapse.

Murray's insistence that a "natural disaster" caused the tragedy is aimed at protecting himself and his business interests and distracting attention from a record of safety violations and reports that the mine employed the dangerous method of "retreat mining," in which pillars of coal holding up the mine roof are removed as miners leave a dug-out area, intentionally causing a roof collapse.

Stickler has said little or nothing about retreat mining and the scores of safety violations found at the mine. This is not surprising. Stickler is a former mine boss appointed by President Bush to head MSHA and continue the administration's policy of dismantling safety regulations and gutting enforcement in order to boost the profits of the coal companies. Murray is a major Republican donor who has testified before Congress on behalf of the National Mining Association and called for tax breaks and the lifting of environmental and safety regulations.

Politicians such as Republican Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah, who support the Bush administration's agenda of rolling back mine safety rules, have lined up to shed crocodile tears for the trapped miners.

Others, such as Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, have issued two-faced statements suggesting that the underlying causes of such mine disasters are a mystery. Kennedy, who chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, said there were "too many unanswered questions" and it was necessary to determine "how future disasters like these can be prevented."

Such hypocritical doubletalk is intended to obscure the fact that measures essential to protecting the lives and limbs of coal miners are not carried out because they would cut into coal industry profits. The technology and know-how already exist to virtually eliminate mine disasters and dramatically reduce if not eliminate mine fatalities, including refuge stations—already in use in Europe, Australia and Canada—that are equipped with adequate supplies of oxygen, water and food and have proper communications systems.

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