

Kentucky coal miner killed

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A coal miner died after being struck in the head by a steel roof jack in a Harlan County, Kentucky mine on June 16. The victim, 42-year-old James Carmack, was the 38th fatality among US coal miners this year, and one of hundreds worldwide.

Carmack leaves behind six children—including one son who was working at the Clover Fork mine at the time of the accident—and his wife, with whom he had just celebrated their first wedding anniversary. Since the beginning of the year, four Kentucky miners have died in accidents, all roof collapses.

According to a preliminary report from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), a 100-ton roof jack was dislodged by a shifting seam of coal, or a rib roll, along the wall of Lone Mountain Processing's Clover Fork No. 1 mine, which was being "retreat mined." At around 3:30 in the afternoon, Carmack was working as a section foreman in the mine when a slab of coal 15 feet by 12 feet came crushing against the jack.

Retreat mining is a process where the support pillars of old mines are extracted and the ceiling is allowed to collapse in each section as miners make their way out of the pit. It is an extremely dangerous and unstable operation. The Kentucky state government has relaxed safety regulations in recent years, at the behest of the coal industry, to allow for abandoned mines to be reopened. Particularly in the coalfields region of Appalachia, where the mountains have been mined for nearly a century and a half, coal companies eye the hundreds of abandoned mine shafts as easy profit.

National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) data indicate that retreat mining operations account for 10 percent of total US coal production, but a quarter of roof fall fatalities.

The Clover Fork No. 1 mine is owned by Arch Coal, the second-largest coal producer in the US and one of the largest mining corporations in the world, with an

annual revenue of nearly \$3 billion. Clover Fork is one of several mines operated by Lone Mountain in Harlan County, Kentucky, near the town of Holmes Mill. Taken together, the Harlan County mines produced 2.2 million tons for Arch last year, processed at a rate of 1,200 tons per hour.

The Clover Fork mine has been cited 177 times since the beginning of the year, and MSHA lists 34 violations since May. Most of the violations have either not been assessed for penalties, or Lone Mountain Processing stands in delinquency; MSHA lists only seven violations in 2010 for which penalties have been paid.

The staggering rate of production, coupled with lax safety regulations and lack of enforcement, has made fatal accidents inevitable. Indeed, the deaths of miners are regarded as part of the cost of doing business.

In 2006, an electrician was crushed by machinery in another Lone Mountain mine operation near the Clover Fork mine. On May 20 of that year, an explosion at the nearby Darby Mine No. 1 killed five more miners.

Clover Fork No. 1 has had 29 accidents since January 2008, and 57 since the mine was reopened under the Lone Mountain Processing operator.

MSHA records indicate that the Clover Fork mine has seen 23 falls of the roof or back since 2003, including five in the past year. On March 8, 2010 an 8-foot-thick slab that measured 20 feet long by 20 feet wide fell, with federal investigators noting, "Persons in by the fall were moved out of the area until the secondary escapeway was rerouted." It is clear from such brief reports that multiple fatalities could easily have occurred in many recent incidents.

Six black lung cases among Clover Fork miners have also been officially reported since 2003. Black lung, or coal workers' pneumoconiosis, has resurged among the workforce, particularly in the coalfields region of Appalachia. According to the NIOSH, nearly 9 percent of miners with 25 years or more on the job have

developed black lung, and the rate is rising for younger miners. Although the disease is incapacitating, chronic, and ultimately fatal, these deaths are not included on the safety records of mining operations.

The current conditions of the miners in Harlan County carry a historical significance. Known as “Bloody Harlan” in the 1930s, the area was a flashpoint of struggle for the coal miners against the oppression of the coal bosses and the political establishment.

Miners fought against both private armed thugs and National Guard troops brought in to enforce the demands of the coal companies, ultimately winning union recognition. The struggle to organize miners into the United Mine Workers of America and win better wages and conditions continued into the mid-1970s in Harlan, culminating in a 13-month strike at the Brookside Mine.

The decades that followed saw countless betrayals of the miners by the UMW. In Harlan and throughout the coalfields of Appalachia, miners saw their struggles isolated or circumvented by rotten backroom deals between the union bureaucracy and the coal companies. Since the 1980s, UMW membership in the region has dwindled to no more than a few dozen today. Former miners and residents in the area told this reporter that today Harlan County has no unionized mines.

As throughout Appalachia, mines in Harlan today employ far fewer workers, armed with less training and experience, to extract coal at breakneck rates. Local residents, many deeply impoverished and with prospects limited to minimum wage retail jobs or going down into the mines, are a captive workforce to the coal operators.



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