Another Kentucky coal mining fatality

Naomi Spencer
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In the span of barely a week, a second Kentucky coal miner has been killed in an underground mining operation. The death of Bobby Smith in a James River Coal Company mine near Hazard on June 24 brings to 39 the number of coal miners killed so far this year.

Smith, a 29-year-old Vicco, Kentucky, resident, was operating a continuous mining machine in the Leeco 68 underground coal mine near the town of Jeff in Perry County. At around 1:15 p.m., according to a preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Smith was caught between the machine and the rib of the wall and crushed. Smith was transported to the surface, then taken to the hospital in Hazard, where he was pronounced dead. Few other details have been released as of this writing.

The Leeco 68 mine is part of a complex owned by James River Coal Company in Knott and Perry counties in southeastern Kentucky. MSHA records show 25 injury accidents at the mine since 2008, and two roof falls. Leeco 68 has been cited by federal inspectors more than 360 times so far in 2010, including more than 40 in the past month.

The mine owner, James River Coal, produced 9.8 million tons of coal last year, mostly from Appalachian underground mines. The company reported revenues of $681 million last year.

The accident comes eight days after the death of another miner at the nearby Clover Fork No. 1 mine in Harlan County. Jimmy Carmack was killed when he was struck by a 100-ton roof jack that was dislodged by a large slab of coal. (See "Kentucky coal miner killed .") Since the beginning of the year, five Kentucky miners have died, all but Smith from roof or wall collapses.

The coalfields of Kentucky and West Virginia produce tremendous amounts of coal each year. Thousands of tons of coal are processed at dozens of preparation plants and miles of coal cars stream out of the mountains every hour, carrying millions of dollars worth of the material.

The population of the region, by contrast, lives with little infrastructure and in deep poverty. The double-digit unemployment and poverty rates that have persisted for decades are worsening under the impact of the global recession. In Perry County, one in three people lives below the poverty threshold; per capita income is $12,200. Knott, Harlan, and other surrounding counties languish in similar conditions.

In Vicco, the home of Bobby Smith, the poverty rate approaches 50 percent, with 35 percent of families living on less than $10,000 a year. Faced with such financial hardships, residents of the coalfields have few options economically beyond the mines or minimum-wage retail jobs.

The large number of mining deaths in the US and worldwide reflect the intensifying exploitation of workers in the drive for profit and increasing competition within the industry. This process is spurred on by the energy policies of the Obama administration and its state counterparts, which include the ramping up of domestic energy production in the name of "national security."

Energy companies, with the help of government regulatory agencies and the trade unions, have circumvented workplace safety and health standards while reducing their workforces in order to squeeze out ever-greater productivity and surplus value.

This frenzied pursuit of profit has resulted in a spike of industrial accidents and environmental devastation worldwide, including US disasters like the April 5 Upper Big Branch mine explosion that killed 29 and the April 20 Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion that killed 11 workers and has devastated the entire Gulf Coast.

This year is the deadliest since 2006, when 47 coal miners were killed, including 12 in a methane explosion in the Sago Mine in West Virginia and 5 in another explosion at the Darby Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky. That year registered both fatality and production rates resembling those of the 1980s; 2006 also marked a legislative shift to allow more-dangerous mining procedures while paying lip service to improved safety standards.

Mine companies were given a legal cover to pose as though they were concerned with improving safety, while doing little to nothing to protect their workers. Most mine operators in Kentucky, for example, still have not implemented safeguards such as the self-rescuing devices, refuge chambers, improved communicators and respirators they were ostensibly required to provide for their employees.

MSHA statistics indicated that only 10 of 127 mines under review in Kentucky had put in place improved communications since 2006, and only 3 percent of eastern Kentucky mines have implemented communication systems at all. Similar conditions dominate in West Virginia.

At the same time, scores of old mines in eastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia have been reopened for retreat mining, increasing the likelihood of deaths from roof collapses. The coal industry in the region, meanwhile, pockets hundreds of millions of dollars in tax breaks and other “incentives.” Indeed, according to one recent review, the coal operators in West Virginia now cost the state more in incentives and inspections than what the industry pays into the state in taxes.