

Coal miner killed in Illinois mine

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A coal miner was killed in a southern Illinois underground mine July 9, bringing the US death toll to 41 this year. Thomas Brown, a 61-year-old section foreman from Eddyville, Kentucky, died after he was struck by a 20-ton loaded shuttle car in the Willow Lake mine in Saline County.

ABC news affiliate WSIL Channel 3 reported that co-workers said Brown was planning to retire within a couple of weeks.

The accident follows by little more than a week a similar accident in West Virginia. On July 1, 60-year-old mine electrician Wilbert Starcher was crushed by a loaded shuttle car in the Massey Energy-owned Pocahontas Mine. (See “West Virginia miner killed in Massey operation”)

Mine accidents and fatalities in the US are on pace to reach levels not seen since the 1980s, while the workforce continues to decline. Coal extraction rates, however, continue to increase. The mining death toll is rising worldwide as a consequence of frenzied national competition, exacerbated by the global economic crisis, and the ratcheting up of energy production.

According to Peabody’s web site, the Willow Lake site employs 400 workers and “operates year round, seven days a week, with two production shifts per day, operating four fishtail and one walk-through super section units.... The Willow Lake Preparation Plant is a 1,400 raw-ton-per-hour heavy media plant with the capability to blend or segregate according to coal quality.”

The miners at Willow Lake are unionized under the AFL-CIO-affiliated International Brotherhood of Boilermakers. The union has not issued a statement regarding the accident.

Willow Lake was one of 57 mines identified by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) as a dangerous operation following the Upper Big Branch disaster that killed 29 miners on April 5.

Eager to appear aggressive toward repeat violators, MSHA conducted a round of inspections at Willow Lake and issued a series of citations for inadequate protections against roof falls and combustible dust buildup.

The mine was cited at least a dozen times for significant and substantial violations for life-threatening conditions since 2008. Peabody appealed the \$230,000 in fines associated with the significant and substantial citations in June, calling them “inflammatory, unfounded and confrontational.”

The mine, owned by billion-dollar company Peabody Energy and operated through subsidiary Big Ridge, Inc., has a substantial history of violations. Since the beginning of the year, MSHA records indicate Willow Lake has had 34 accidents or injuries, and 65 since July 2009. Many of the listings are for massive roof falls, injuries causing broken bones, cuts requiring stitches, or head injuries requiring MRIs.

The MSHA database lists some \$6 million in penalties for safety violations since 2007, of which only \$1.6 million has been paid. Last year alone the mine was fined more than \$2.5 million for nearly a thousand separate citations, and for the first quarter this year racked up over half a million more dollars in fines for over 400 citations.

The mine produces 3.7 million tons of coal a year for Peabody, the largest private-sector coal company in the world. With annual revenues of \$6.6 billion and \$9.8 billion in assets, the company wields considerable influence over the economy and political establishment in Illinois, Kentucky, and Indiana, as well as in eastern Australia where the company holds a concentration of mines.

Peabody is the recipient of regular handouts from Illinois in the form of tax breaks and fast-tracked environmental permits for its operations. From Kentucky alone, Peabody has received at least \$300

million in tax breaks and “incentives” since 2007 to develop so-called “clean coal technology” in the western edge of the state. In Indiana, where Peabody and other energy companies are expanding operations, the Department of Environmental Management investigative and enforcement arm is headed by a former lobbyist and lawyer for the company. Indiana has 90 coal-fired power plants, and Peabody has secured contracts to supply an estimated \$6 billion in coal in the state over the next few years.

The National Coal Council, chaired by Peabody Energy executives, has pressed for a doubling of US coal consumption by 2025 in the name of “energy independence”—a central feature of the Obama administration’s energy policies. During his presidential campaign, Obama, an Illinois senator at the time, emphasized his pro-coal credentials through multiple stops in the economically strained southern region and stumping for the coal industry.

The coal basin of southern Illinois has long been a focus for the so-called “greening of coal” campaign, which is little more than an acceleration of production with the blessing of federal and state subsidies. Peabody is presently building one of the largest coal-fired power plants in the country in southern Illinois, at a cost of \$4.4 billion, funded largely by distressed towns in the area. The municipalities are locked into 28-year contracts that impose higher energy costs on residents to foot the bill.



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