

Another West Virginia coal miner killed

Naomi Spencer
3 August 2010

A roof bolter was killed July 29 in a northern West Virginia underground coal mine when a section of the wall collapsed on him. The death brings to 42 the number of US coal miners killed so far this year, 33 in West Virginia.

The miner, Jessie Adkins, 39, of Belington, West Virginia, was securing the rock overhead in a section of the Loveridge #22 Mine when the wall collapsed. According to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration's (MSHA) preliminary report, he was pinned between a continuous mining machine and the slab, a collapse known as a "rib roll." A miner for seven years, Adkins leaves behind a wife and two children.

Consol Energy, the billion-dollar company that operates the Marion County mine through subsidiary Consolidation Coal Company, idled the mine for a mere 24 hours after the fatal accident.

Consol, which chiefly operates in West Virginia and Pennsylvania and the coal basin of southern Illinois, wields an annual operating revenue of \$3.8 billion. Consol's underground mines are unusually large in scale. In addition to coal, Consol also operates extensive natural gas rigs in the Marcellus shale region, which it plans to expand by the end of the year, and the company is preparing to begin extraction operations for metallurgical coal in Central Appalachia.

MSHA records indicate that the Loveridge site is a large advance-mining operation, with 640 miners. MSHA reports that 143 miners were on-site at the time of the accident. The MSHA database carries a large number of accidents and violations for the mine, including an incident July 13 in which two miners were trapped for an hour and 20 minutes after their elevator became stuck mid-shaft. This incident followed a similar one May 27, when a miner was trapped for 45 minutes in the elevator hoisting system.

Since the beginning of the year, Loveridge recorded

28 accidents, including two large roof falls. MSHA has issued over 450 citations against Consolidation Coal Company for safety violations since January 1. Since 2006, Consolidation has been fined more than \$3 million, of which \$1.6 million is unpaid.

Along with its rivals across the energy sector, Consol has sought to boost the productivity of its workforce through speedups, increased extraction rates, and cutting corners on safety.

At the time of his death, Adkins was bolting the roof from atop a continuous mining machine that was in operation. Consol integrated the two processes in order to more quickly extract coal.

State Mine Safety Director Ron Wooten told West Virginia *MetroNews* that the rib roll occurred just after Adkins's crew began cutting at an overcast, which involves ramming the machine into a higher area of the roof than normal. The machine was cutting into rock, rather than the softer coal. "They had actually just started the cut," Wooten said. "But they were cutting rock, and that causes a lot of vibration and a lot of noise. The feeling is that the vibration may have jarred that piece of rock loose from the wall."

Wooten also noted that while the continuous miner had rib guards in place, the slab that crushed him rolled down between the safety shields. "There were no witnesses per se," he said. "Other members of his crew say they simply saw his light go down to the floor." The rock, which measured 16 feet long, 5 feet wide and 16 inches thick, was too massive for Adkins' coworkers to remove without putting in multiple jacks.

Wooten also told the *MetroNews*, according to the news outlet, that "[I]t's too early to tell if the mine owner, Consol Energy, will receive any citations or notice of violation from the incident."

Following the deaths of 29 miners April 5 at the Upper Big Branch mine, coal companies have been subject to increased inspections by federal and state

agencies eager to appear aggressive in defense of safety standards. At the same time, fatalities have continued at an annualized rate not seen since the 1980s, and accidents like roof collapses are increasingly common.

Mine operators have complained that the more frequent inspections have undercut profits in the second quarter. Just an hour before the Loveridge accident, Consol executives announced production declines for the quarter, but, in an effort to reassure investors, stated that they did not expect additional scrutiny from safety agencies to increase production costs. CEO Brett Harvey insisted, “We don’t believe we’re perfect, but we believe we can achieve a perfect place when it comes to the safety of individuals.”

Massey Energy, which owns the Upper Big Branch mine, reported that the company’s coal deep mine production was 500,000 tons lower than projected because of what CEO Don Blankenship and President Baxter Phillips characterized as “distractions” related to the accident. The company reported an \$88.7 million loss for the second quarter. Massey is resuming operations at the Upper Big Branch mine; while it remained closed, the company shifted operations to other mines in Pike County, Kentucky, and ramped output up to frenzied rates.

Patriot Coal and International Coal Group also reported increased costs due to safety enforcement. According to Patriot’s second quarter report, operating costs per ton rose to \$56.69 per ton, from \$52 a year earlier. Most of the increase was attributed to “lower production due to more comprehensive regulatory inspections and related ventilation adjustments in a number of our mines, as well as roof falls at the Harris and Highland complexes.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact