Another Kentucky coal miner killed

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A coal miner was crushed in a powered haulage accident in an eastern Kentucky mine Monday night. The death brings to nine the number of US miners killed on the job since January. It is the third mining fatality in the coalfields region in as many weeks.

The accident occurred at 7 p.m. in the Voyager Number 7 underground mine, located in Martin County. Twenty-six-year-old Ryan K. Thatcher of Salyersville was operating a track locomotive, hauling cars of supplies, when he was caught between the equipment and a low steel roof beam.

The preliminary report from the federal Mine Health and Safety Administration (MSHA) issued Tuesday morning stated that after becoming pinned, Thatcher "received fatal crushing head injuries."

No other workers were present at the time of the accident. He was found near a conveyor belt by a co-worker. The miner "immediately started CPR and continued resuscitation attempts until reaching the surface." At this point, the MSHA report states, "all resuscitation attempts ceased when paramedics examined the victim and found no life signs."

Although only in his mid-twenties, Thatcher had been a miner for more than six years, including two and a half years at the Voyager Number 7.

The mine, operated by the Martin County Coal Corporation, was acquired in June by Alpha Natural Resources as part of its $7 billion buyout of Massey Energy. It has been shut down while the Kentucky Office of Mine Safety investigates.

Since the beginning of the year, the mine has seen four accidents, all roof or wall collapses. On June 6, little more than a month before Thatcher's death, a rock fall sent a mine electrician to the hospital with a head injury.

Voyager Number 7 has had an accident rate more than twice the national average over the past year. Federal inspectors have cited the mine 60 times since January, including 16 for significant and substantial (S&S) violations. S&S violations are those determined to present an imminent risk of death to workers and warrant the immediate suspension of operations. In the past year, the mine has received 41 S&S citations, one in four of which were classified as "high" or "reckless disregard."

In spite of this safety record, the mine does not meet MSHA's criteria for exhibiting a "pattern of violations," which would result in closure. In fact, the mine is typical of the underground operations that riddle the area: small, dangerous and highly profitable.

Some 70 miners extract half a million tons of coal annually out of the Voyager Number 7. That mine is one of eight others in the county controlled by Martin County Coal Corporation, including several large-scale surface mines that are presently idle but which Alpha Natural Resources is seeking to activate.

Now controlling 110 mines and 5 billion tons in coal reserves, Alpha reported first quarter revenues of $1.13 billion—up 23 percent over the same period last year. The company boasts an annual production capacity of greater than 90 million tons.

Alpha's profits are expected to soar still higher in the coming year with the addition of Massey's Appalachian mines, along with rising international

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demand for the region's rich bituminous and metallurgical coal.

The US is on track to export 100 million tons of coal this year, an increase of 25 percent over 2010. This is the highest level of coal exports in nearly two decades. The bulk of US coal orders come from China, which imports 45 to 50 million tons of coal annually to power its industrial sector and produce steel.

Due to flooding in Australia and other recent disasters, global metallurgical coal supplies have tightened, pushing up both demand and prices for Appalachian coke. In the first quarter, this type of coal sold for a record $330 per metric ton.

The price rise has driven the frenzy of mergers within the industry, along with efforts to dismantle environmental and safety regulations and activate ever-larger surface mining operations in the area.

The Obama administration and its state-level counterparts have aggressively cut funding and stripped enforcement powers from regulatory agencies including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and mine safety agencies.

Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, a Democrat, has filed a lawsuit with the Kentucky Coal Association against the EPA over the Clean Water Act, which has prevented 11 major surface mining projects from proceeding in the coalfields region. Several of these projects were included in the Massey acquisition.

The rising price of coal has also contributed to a steady stream of mine accidents, both in the US and internationally, as operators strive for higher production rates.

Thatcher's death is the third in the region in less than a month. On July 2, a miner was killed by a wall collapse in Harlan, Kentucky; just four days prior, a West Virginia miner died the same way. On March 25, a miner was killed in another Martin County coal mine.

Economic, political, and social life in Martin County, one of the poorest in the US, is dominated by the coal industry. One in five households subsists on less than $10,000 per year; per capita income is a meager $12,500. The county's poverty rate stands at 45 percent. Officially, unemployment in the county is 13.6 percent, with 61 percent of the working age population classified as "not in labor force."

Although mining, logging, and hauling jobs are dangerous, wages are comparably higher than jobs in the service or hospitality industries. Few other options present themselves for residents without higher education degrees, compelling many to endure immense workplace hazards and health risks.

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