Two more US coal miners killed on the job

Clement Daly
22 August 2011

The deaths of two miners in the span of a week bring to 14 the number of US coal mine fatalities this year, and highlight the drive to increase extraction rates at small operations.

On August 15, 46-year-old Charles M. Hall was killed in a West Virginia coal mine when a piece of roof collapsed, crushing him. Hall had been installing roof supports for a longwall equipment move at the Mountaineer II Mine when the accident occurred, according to a preliminary report by the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Hall, who was from the nearby town of Williamson, had nearly six years of experience, almost all of which was in the Mountaineer II Mine. He is the fifth West Virginia miner to be killed this year.

The Mountaineer II mine is located near the town of Sharples in Logan County and is owned by the Mingo Logan Coal Company, a subsidiary of Arch Coal. It is one of numerous other small mines in the area owned by the energy giant that together produce millions of tons of coal every year.

Like other small operations, the mine is rife with safety hazards. MSHA records eight roof falls in the Mountaineer II this year alone, with operations being shut down as recently as July 28 in order to clean up a massive fall like the one that killed Hall.

Over the past 12 months, the mine has received 163 significant and substantial (S&S) violations, or violations that could "reasonably be expected to lead to a serious injury or illness." This includes five that were classified as "reckless disregard" violations for "aggravated conduct constituting more than ordinary negligence." This record, however, is not sufficient to meet MSHA's Pattern of Violations (POV) criteria, which would have placed the mine under increased scrutiny and possible closure.

Roof and rib, or wall, falls are the greatest cause of fatalities in underground mines. Last year, rib failures took the lives of three miners. Roof falls killed another three. So far this year, there have been two rib fall fatalities, with Hall becoming the year's first roof fall death. An additional 100 miners are injured in such accidents annually.

While the number of roof and rib fall fatalities has declined significantly over the last three decades, there has been a surge in recent years. Between 2005 and 2007, 31 miners were killed in roof and rib falls, compared with 13 between 2002 and 2004. MSHA has attributed this trend "in large part to the rise in mining heights underground." A recent study of rib failure fatalities since 1995 identified a mine's height and depth of cover as the two greatest risk factors contributing to falls.

Armed with new technology and emboldened by the impotence of MSHA and state regulators, coal companies are reentering areas that were once considered too risky. According to a recent MSHA publication on roof and rib falls, "Most of today's mines are in coal reserves that had previously been avoided because of poor roof conditions. These mines are frequently deeper and may have abandoned mines above and/or below them which often exert additional stress on the roof and ribs."

During the first six months of 2011, the Mountaineer II Mine was issued six citations for inadequate "protection from falls of roof, face and ribs," two associated with the mine's roof control plan, and three related to roof supports and bolting. The ongoing third quarter health and safety inspection of the mine has already resulted in a citation for inadequate "protection from falls of roof, face and ribs," as well as three violations associated with the mine's roof control plan.

Far from intervening on behalf of miners to counter these increasingly risky and reckless mining operations industry-wide, MSHA has restricted itself to issuing appeals to the coal bosses. According the MSHA chief

Joe Main, the agency's recently launched Preventative Roof/Rib Outreach Program (PROP) is aimed at "increas[ing] mine operators' awareness about the hazards and precautions necessary to prevent such accidents."

MSHA does not explain why any coal operator not intimately "aware" of what has historically been "the single greatest cause of fatalities in underground coal mines" should be licensed to operate a coal mine.

The PROP booklet published by the agency explains that there are two broad categories of roof/rib hazards: "natural" and "mining related." While the "natural sources are pre-existing conditions that can't be changed," those which are mining related "are often under our direct control" through the mine design. The agency inadvertently makes a compelling argument for workers' management of the mines when it concludes, however, that "most of the decisions involving mine design issues … are usually made by mine management."

The Mountaineer II Mine's owner, St. Louis-based Arch Coal, is one of the largest coal producers in the world, selling 179 million tons of coal in 2010. The company's recent $3.5 billion acquisition of International Coal Group (ICG) makes it the second largest metallurgical coal supplier in the US. In total, the company controls some 5.5 billion tons of coal reserves, accounting for 16 percent of the domestic coal supply.

The Mountaineer II mine is part of Arch's Mountain Laurel coal operations, one of the company's 24 mining complexes across the US. The Mountain Laurel alone turned out more than 5 million tons of coal last year and is extremely profitable for the company.

Arch reported a record $248 million in second quarter earnings, which represents a nearly 25 percent increase over last year. According to the company's quarterly reports, these huge profit margins are being driven by an increase in output, a decrease in operating costs, and a jump in metallurgical coal prices.

The company has seen a 20 percent jump in output in the second quarter coupled with a $0.86 per ton decline in operating costs over the same period. Both of these are attributed specifically to the acquisition of ICG and the company's longwall operations, of which the Mountain Laurel is an integral part. At the same time, the company notes that the average sales price per ton of coal increased by $6.31 during the second quarter.

The fortunes of coal giants like Arch are inseparable from the expansion of global coal consumption, which reached 8 billion tons in 2010. China's industrial sector alone consumed 3.5 billion tons of coal last year. These trends are projected to continue with mid-decade coal demand estimated at nearly 9.5 billion tons.

This rising demand for coal has fueled the drive to extract coal from already heavily mined seams, including machine mining old mines previously cut by hand. One mining method, known as retreat mining, involves pulling pillars of coal that previously served as roof supports. This is particularly dangerous for miners, who must control the collapse of the mine roof from the back outward to the surface.

Two weeks ago on Monday, August 8, a miner was killed at an underground retreat coal mine in southeastern Ohio. American Energy Corporation, the mine's operator, reported that Keith Baker was struck in the chest by the top of a jack cylinder that "catastrophically failed." The jack was part of a roof support in the company's Century Mine.

Baker, who had 10 years of experience at the mine, was from the nearby town of Jacobsburg.

According to MSHA records, the Century Mine has been issued 114 S&S violations over the past 12 months, four of which were classified as "reckless disregard" citations. American Energy is one of 40 subsidiaries of the Murray Energy Corporation, the largest privately owned coal company in America. Murray produces 30 million tons of bituminous coal a year, almost 7 million of which come from the Century Mine.