

Miner killed, another injured after roof collapse at UK colliery

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One coal miner was killed and another injured after a roof collapsed on Tuesday at the private Kellingley colliery in North Yorkshire, England.

Anxious relatives had gathered at the pithead after an emergency call was made shortly before 5pm (GMT), reporting that two men were trapped 800 metres underground by debris after a roof collapsed.

A specialist hazardous area response team, doctors and the Yorkshire Air Ambulance were dispatched to the scene. Three hours later, Gareth Williams, managing director of UK Coal, which owns and operates Kellingley, confirmed that a roof had fallen in, trapping the two men.

On Wednesday, the dead man was identified as Gerry Gibson, 49, who was described as a “highly skilled and well respected coal face worker, having worked in the industry since 1979.”

The injured man, named as Philip Sheldon, is said to be recovering at home after receiving hospital treatment.

Kellingley colliery once employed around 2,000 miners and now has a workforce of around 800. It is the last deep coal mine in Yorkshire.

An investigation has been launched by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and North Yorkshire Police. Andrew Mackintosh, UK Coal communications director described the incident as a “total shock” and said he was “at a loss” to know what had happened.

“It was a very good [coal] face for working conditions, the equipment was brand new so there’s nothing immediately that springs to mind,” he said.

Some of those gathered at the colliery were of a different mind.

Before the names of the men involved were announced, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the parents of Martin Crowther, who along with other

families were waiting anxiously for news of their loved ones.

Robert Crowther told the WSWs that Martin works as a fitter at the pit and is also a member of a miners’ rescue team. Martin is a fourth generation miner. Robert himself is a former miner. His own father had worked down the pit from the age of 12 years, and his grandfather was killed in a mining accident.

He spoke bitterly about the pressure for increased production at Kellingley. He said, “The pits now run by UK Coal mining were originally bought by Richard Budge ‘for a song’. They were practically given away. Kellingley went into the red not long ago and management talked about closing it. But the men have boosted production to keep the pit open.”

Robert said that although the official working week is 35 hours, his son regularly works seven 12 hour shifts a week to earn enough to keep his family. He said, “He has to work those hours because his gross basic pay is £300 plus a week and it is not enough to live on. He is 40 years of age and this is the seventh pit he has worked in. As the pits have closed he has had to travel further and further away from his home in Horbury.”

As we spoke, Robert’s wife Abby Crowther received a phone call from another son. She told us, “That is another of my sons who has just returned from Afghanistan and he is ringing up to see how Martin is going on. It’s never ending.” She explained that Martin had been to hospital on the previous day to receive treatment for his back which had been injured in a previous pit accident when he had been trapped by a machine. She said, “He has never been right since.”

Martin’s relations wept when they heard he was safe.

UK Coal was founded by Richard Budge in 1974 as RJB Mining. Following the defeat of the year-long miners’ strike in 1984-85, 170 pits were closed and

thousands of workers laid off. In 1994, the remaining 15 pits were privatised.

RJB Mining grew fivefold with the acquisition of British Coal's core assets. The company changed its name to UK Coal in 2001 after Budge retired.

It is now the largest extractor of coal in the country. Last year, it claims to have mined approximately 14 percent of all the coal burned in the UK—equivalent to the energy needed to provide around 5 percent of the country's electricity requirements. The company posted total revenue in 2010 of over £351million.

As well as operating three deep mines, the company also has three surface mines. Due to price increases in imported coal in recent years, as well as other forms of energy, the economic viability of British mined coal has increased. UK Coal has subsequently proposed a series of mainly opencast mining developments, including the Minorca mine in Measham, Leicestershire.

The Kellingley incident occurred on the eve of the funeral of Charles Breslin, 62. Breslin died alongside David Powell, 50, Garry Jenkins, 39, and Phillip Hill, 45 on September 15 at the small private hillside Gleision colliery in Swansea Valley, Wales.

All four were killed when a retaining wall holding back a body of water underground failed, flooding the tunnel where they were working. As the WSWS explained, their appalling working conditions—in extremely confined spaces, using explosives and shovels to remove the coal—exposed the revival of Dickensian-style exploitation in mining and other industries across the country.

A welcome board at the Kellingley pit states that this is a place where "Safety Comes First". But Gerry Gibson is the third fatality in three years.

In September 2008, Don Cook, 50, was killed in a rock fall. On October 18, 2009, Ian Cameron, 46, died at the colliery after equipment fell on him.

Less than a year ago, on November, 30, 2010, 218 workers had to be evacuated after an underground methane gas explosion. The colliery was closed for two weeks.

UK Coal has also received summonses from the HSE relating to four deaths in separate incidents at its other collieries.

UK Coal boasted in its Interim Report for 2011 that, "Our three deep mines produced 3.1 million tonnes.

Daw Mill, Kellingley and Thoresby all achieved higher levels of output than in the first half of 2010."

The pressure for production at Kellingley is indicated by the fact that the pit was open and producing coal over the whole of the Christmas 2010 period. This was to make up for production lost during the closure following the methane gas explosion a month earlier.

On Wednesday it was revealed that the number of mining deaths has risen more than five-fold—from three deaths between 2000 and 2006 to 17 from 2006 to today.



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