Kentucky coal miner killed

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A “rib roll” wall collapse in an underground Pike County, Kentucky, mine claimed the life of a miner June 25. The accident brings to 10 the number of coal miners killed on the job this year.

Thirty-three-year-old Farley Sargent was laying rail track in the McCoy Elkhorn Coal Corporation Mine No. 23 at 11:40 a.m. Monday when a massive slab of the wall fell into the mine corridor, crushing him. The mine is owned by coal giant James River Coal.

Sargent is the seventh Appalachian miner to be killed this year, and the second at a McCoy Elkhorn Coal-operated mine. The Kentucky Department of Natural Resources has closed the shaft to investigate the accident.

McCoy Elkhorn Coal runs a large complex of underground and surface mines across Pike and Floyd Counties. The underground mines use the room-and-pillar mining method. Just over 100 miners work in the No. 23 mine.

Coal from the complex is processed at two nearby preparation plants also owned by James River Coal, then loaded onto CSX railroad cars and shipped out every four hours. The operation serves industry and electric utilities across the US Midwest, as well as internationally. Including its subsidiaries, James River Coal reported revenues upwards of $300 million for the first quarter of 2012.

Conditions at the No. 23 mine are typical of underground operations throughout the industry. Data from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) record at least 20 injuries and two fatalities at the mine in the past half-decade. Inspectors have issued more than 1,000 citations for safety violations over the period.

Since the beginning of the year, the MSHA has issued 80 citations against the mine, including 33 for significant and substantial (S&S) violations. This is a category of citation reserved for hazards deemed to pose imminent danger to workers. In the previous 12 months, MSHA inspectors issued 58 such citations against the No. 23 mine. Fourteen of these became “final orders,” meaning that life-threatening hazards such as malfunctioning machinery, unstable walls, inadequate roof supports, poor ventilation, and the build-up of combustible dust were allowed to persist even after they were repeatedly cited.

In spite of this record, the MSHA did not designate the No. 23 mine as having a “pattern of violations.” This classification would have given inspectors the authority to order McCoy Elkhorn to halt operations until the problems were fixed.

Among numerous accidents at the mine over the past few years have been more than 20 falls of the roof or walls. In several cases, miners were struck and injured by slabs of rock. Many of the falls involved sections of wall measuring more than 10 feet thick and 30 to 70 feet across. The pace of activity in the mine, combined with the scale of such cave-ins, suggests that conditions for fatal accidents are ever-present.

McCoy Elkhorn’s nearby No. 15 mine presents a similar state of affairs. The MSHA database lists 54 S&S violations for the past year, 19 of which became final orders. James River Coal has paid only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines for each of its mines.

On April 25, a 61-year-old miner was killed after falling from a 30-foot-high catwalk at McCoy Elkhorn’s KC No. 1 underground mine in Knott County. The miner, who had 20 years of experience, was working as a contractor. His name has not been released.

Millions of tons of coal are exported from underground Appalachian mines each year, bound for the national and world markets. With local financial institutions holding more than $1 billion, most bound up with the energy industry, Pikeville, the Pike County

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seat, is one of the largest banking centers in the US mid-South.

The population of the region, by contrast, lives with little infrastructure and long-term economic distress. The per capita income for the so-called "energy capital of America" is less than $19,000. One in four Pike County residents lives below the poverty line.

The coalfields have been marred by double-digit unemployment, deep poverty, and all manner of social ills for decades. These conditions have worsened under the impact of the global economic crisis.

The steady string of mining accidents reflects the relentless drive for profit in the face of eroding industrial demand. As growth slows in China, one of the primary destinations for high-grade Appalachian coal, producers have scrambled to cut operating costs and maximize productivity and surplus value.

With its stock recently downgraded to junk status by Standard & Poor's, James River Coal is gearing up with redoubled ferocity to squeeze profit from its miners. In particular, the company has announced intentions to increase coal exports out of Appalachian mines by at least 3.3 percent to offset declining prices.

With the help of government regulators and the trade unions—who have all but abandoned the region—energy companies have violated workplace safety and public health standards with impunity and gutted their workforces. Where the United Mine Workers union once stood hundreds of thousands strong, fewer than 15,600 miners remain in Kentucky. Not a single mine in eastern Kentucky is unionized.

So far this year, 1,500 miners have been laid off in eastern Kentucky, according to the region's Workforce Investment Board.

On June 21, Arch Coal announced it was cutting 750 jobs in Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia—600 of them in eastern Kentucky underground operations. St. Louis-based Arch pointed to environmental regulations, a milder winter, and market pressures that are affecting a shift in some utility companies away from coal and toward natural gas.

"It's a tough, tough situation," Eastern Kentucky Workforce Investment Board executive director Jeff Whitehead told the Associated Press Friday. "Eastern Kentucky doesn't have a real diverse economy."

"I just see no prospects for them at this time," Knott County judge-executive Randy Thompson said of the estimated 250 miners to be laid off in the county. At least as many Knott County miners lost their jobs in the past year. "I see another exodus like we saw in the '60s and '70s from east Kentucky at that time to Detroit," he said. "Except there's no Detroit to go to…. I'm not sure what people are going to do."

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