

Two more US coal miners killed

Clement Daly
19 February 2013

Two more coal miners were killed in Illinois and West Virginia last week, bringing the nation's coal mining fatalities to five this year. The deaths come on the heels of those of West Virginia coal miners Edward L. Finney and Brandon E. Townsend the week previous (See, "Two West Virginia coal miners killed").

On Wednesday, 28-year-old Timothy K. Chamness was killed at the Prairie Eagle South Underground Mine in Cutler, Illinois. According to the preliminary report of the accident by the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Chamness was crushed to death after being pinned between the tail of the continuous mining equipment he was operating and a coal rib.

According to his obituary in the *Southern Illinoisan*, Chamness left behind his mother, father, and stepmother; two sisters, a stepbrother and stepsister, a niece and nephew, and his girlfriend. He graduated as class president from Zeigler-Royalton High School in 2002 and had worked in the mines for more than four years, two of which were at Prairie Eagle.

In Franklin County, where Chamness lived in the town of Royalton, and in nearby Perry County where he travelled to work at Prairie Eagle, unemployment stood at 11.9 and 10.9 percent, respectively, in December, and has been above 9 percent in both counties since mid-2008. Under such conditions, even the most academically gifted youth are attracted to work in the mines as one of the few good-paying jobs available.

The Prairie Eagle mine is operated by Knight Hawk Coal and consists of a surface mine opened in 2005 and two underground mines opened in 2006 and 2009. The complex is at the heart of the company's operations, producing more than 3 million of Knight Hawk's 4.2 million tons of coal last year, according to MSHA records. "We are trying to get and stick around 5 million tons a year," Knight Hawk's president Steve Carter told *Coal Age* last year.

MSHA issued four significant and substantial (S&S) violations in the last 12 months to the underground mine Chamness worked at which employs about 50 non-union

miners. Two of these citations were classified as unwarrantable failures and became final orders. In February of 2009, a 27-year-old contractor was killed at the complex's other underground mine after being struck by two bundles of lumber he was delivering.

In its investigation of the accident, MSHA ruled that "The accident occurred because mine management's policies and controls were inadequate and failed to ensure that the truck load of lumber was unloaded in a manner that did not create a hazard to persons."

Knight Hawk opened its first operation in Jackson County in 1998 and has gradually expanded and increased production over the past fifteen years. Today the company operates seven mines in southern Illinois, five of which are surface mines. In 2006, St. Louis-based Arch Coal acquired a one-third interest in the company in return for cash and coal reserves, a stake Arch has since increased to 49 percent.

The Prairie Eagle mine began as a surface mine in 2005 and since the addition of the two underground mines production at the complex has increased nearly eight-fold. The rise of Knight Hawk, considered "one of the industry's brightest successes" by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, is an expression of a general rebound in Illinois coal production over the past several years, driven largely by small and mid-sized mining operators like Knight Hawk.

Following the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act which limited sulfur dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, Illinois' mostly higher sulfur thermal coal was put at a disadvantage relative to the lower sulfur reserves of Appalachia and Wyoming's Powder River Basin. Many of the state's plants opted to switch to lower sulfur coal rather than install the necessary pollution control scrubbers required to meet federal regulations. By 2003, Illinois coal production had declined to 31 million tons, half of its 1990 level, and more than half the coal mining workforce had been laid off.

Production has steadily increased in Illinois over the past several years, driven in part by increased exports.

Last year, coal production in the state increased by 9 percent to 45 million tons, about 12 million tons of which was exported onto the global market.

Last Tuesday, 51-year-old Glen L. Clutter, Jr. of Baxter, West Virginia was killed at the Loveridge No. 22 mine near Fairview in Marion County, becoming the third coal mining fatality in the state this year. According to MSHA, Clutter was attempting to pry the wheel flange of a derailed transport car with a slate bar when “[t]he slate bar flew back and struck the victim on the right side of the face.” The unconscious Clutter was flown to Ruby Memorial Hospital in Morgantown where he was later pronounced dead.

Clutter had over 30 years of experience in the mines with the last ten at Loveridge.

The Loveridge mine is operated by Consolidation Coal Company, a subsidiary of Consol Energy. The mine was opened in 2003 and has produced about 6 million tons of coal each year, employing about 600 miners represented by the United Mine Workers of America. The union has yet to issue a statement on Clutter’s death, posting only a few sentences on its Facebook page.

According to MSHA records, Loveridge has an extensive history of safety violations. In the last 12 months, the mine has been issued 184 S&S violations, 17 of which were classified as exhibiting high or reckless disregard. Since the beginning of the year the mine has racked up 70 safety violations.

In January, an independent drilling contractor was killed near the mine’s preparation plant when the drill rig he was using to conduct exploratory drilling for natural gas overturned and crushed him. The accident was not associated with coal mining operations at the mine and therefore not considered attributable to the company.

In July 2010, 39-year-old Jessie Adkins was killed at Loveridge in a wall failure while he was placing bolts. In its investigation into the accident, MSHA concluded that it resulted from “[t]he mine operator’s policies...[which] did not ensure that the ribs were adequately supported...to protect persons from the hazards associated with rib rolls...[and] existing equipment [which] was unable to install needed rib support and was thereby unsuited to current conditions.” (See, “Another West Virginia coal miner killed”)

MSHA assessed a fine of \$12,248 on February 14, 2011 for the conditions which led to Adkin’s death. Two years later, not a dime of this money has been paid according to MSHA records.

Consol Energy is the largest underground coal producer

in the US, operating 12 mining complexes with reserves of 4.5 billion tons located mostly in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. About three-fourths of the company’s coal is thermal coal used for domestic energy production. The company has also sought to diversify itself in natural gas, increasing its reserves to 3.9 trillion cubic feet in 2012. Consol posted a fourth-quarter profit of \$150 million last year.

Last November, 58-year-old Markel Koon was killed at Consol’s Nolan Run slurry impoundment at its Robinson Run Mine near Lumberport, West Virginia after the bulldozer he was using to expand a section of the massive slurry dam collapsed, dragging him into the 2 billion gallons of slurry contained in the pond. It took recovery teams two weeks to recover Koon’s body.

According to the *Charleston Gazette*, “Federal and state records showed previous questions about stability and leaks at the Nolan Run impoundment, and outlined company concerns that construction to enlarge the dump had not been moving fast enough to keep up with slurry waste generated by the preparation plant at Consol’s nearby Robinson Run Mine.”

After the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection approved Consol’s plan to expand the dam in April of 2009, an intermediate plan was submitted to and approved by DEP in June 2012 due to concerns from the company that the project “may be very close or even lag behind the filling of the pool with slurry.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact