

Four coal miners killed during government shutdown

Clement Daly
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Four coal miners were killed in separate incidents during the 16-day shutdown of the US government, as the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) operated with less than half its staff. The first three deaths occurred over a single weekend, the first time three miners were killed over three days in more than a decade. The deaths bring the coal mine fatality rate in the nation's mines to 18 this year.

On Friday, October 4, Roger R. King died of a head injury at Consol Energy's McElroy Mine when a conveyor chain broke while moving a longwall mining machine. King was a senior longwall maintenance coordinator with more than 40 years working for Consol, 17 of which were at the underground McElroy Mine near Moundsville in West Virginia's Northern Panhandle.

A Fortune 500 Company, Consol is the largest underground coal producer in the US. The McElroy Mine is West Virginia's largest coal mine, employing nearly 1,000 workers, and produced 9.4 million tons of coal last year.

While the McElroy Mine received two safety awards earlier this year, King is the sixth fatality at mine over the last decade, including an explosion which killed three workers in 2003. King is also the third death at a Consol operation in the last 11 months and the sixth West Virginia miner killed this year. (See: "Two more US coal miners killed")

On Saturday, October 5, 47-year-old Robert Smith was killed when the vehicle he was driving flipped over on top of him at the Pattiki Mine near Carmi in Southern Illinois. Smith is the second fatality at the Pattiki Mine since it was reopened in 2002.

The mine is operated by White County Coal and owned by Alliance Resource Partners—the third-largest coal producer in the eastern US, with nearly \$2 billion in assets. Alliance has an appalling safety record, with more than a dozen deaths at its operations over the last 8 years.

However, the company's executives maintain close ties with the Democratic Party, particularly in Kentucky, which allow it to continue its reckless operations with impunity. (See: "Three miners killed in Indiana", "Two miners killed in Kentucky mine collapse", and "Harlan, Kentucky mine worker killed, three injured in separate accidents")

The day after Smith's death, 44-year-old Mark Christopher Stassinis was killed after his dozer plunged 160 feet off a high wall at the Bridger Coal Mine. Stassinis had worked at the Wyoming surface mine near Rock Springs for about two years. His death came less than two months after 24-year-old Jacob Dowdy was crushed to death by a shovel at Arch Coal's giant Black Thunder Mine in Wyoming's Powder River Basin.

The Bridger mine is one of the smaller operations—controlling only 120 million tons of coal—among the massive surface mines in Wyoming which now account for about 40 percent of all US coal production. The mine is owned jointly by Idaho Power Company and PacifiCorp, a utility company owned by Berkshire Hathaway—the investment firm of America's second wealthiest individual, Warren Buffett. Coal from the mine is used to feed PacifiCorp's Jim Bridger Power Plant via a 2.4-mile conveyor belt. The resulting 2,100 megawatts supply power to six western states.

Then, on the following Friday, October 11, 59-year-old Larry Schwartz died after being pinned between a shuttle car and a coal rib at Five Star Mining Company's Prosperity Mine in Pike County, Indiana. According to MSHA data, the mine has an accident rate nearly twice the national average so far this year, along with nearly 150 significant and substantial (S&S) citations over the past 12 months.

The four deaths occurred while nearly 1,400 of MSHA's 2,355 employees were furloughed as part of the government shutdown. According to the agency's

contingency plan, about 750 inspectors—less than half of MSHA’s enforcement staff—performed “targeted inspections” at high-risk operations during the 16-day period. In other words, the federal law requiring the inspection of every underground mine “in its entirety” at least once a quarter and every surface mine twice a year was not being enforced.

In a statement following the first three deaths, MSHA chief Joe Main suggested the mining industry was taking advantage of the situation. “The fact that this occurred over the weekend, when there may be a greater expectation an MSHA inspector would not be present, is a red flag,” said Main. This was further underscored by Schwartz’s death on the following Friday.

Nothing demonstrated the impotence of MSHA in the face of the latest fatalities more than its press release “urging the mining industry to step up its compliance with safety and health regulations.” That the federal agency tasked with regulating the nation’s coal mines is left to plead with the mining industry to follow the federal laws it is tasked with enforcing reveals a great deal about social relations in the United States.

The same press release also reminded miners that they could continue reporting hazardous conditions to the agency’s hot line. Who was going to respond to such reports was unclear, considering that only 13 of the 965 workers at MSHA’s national office remained on the job during the shutdown.

The crippling of mine safety enforcement during the government shutdown played entirely into the hands of the mining industry and the extreme right, which has long argued, if not for complete industry self-regulation, then for an inspections regime of targeted enforcement, as was carried out by MSHA.

“Targeting resources is something we’ve advocated in the past,” explained National Mining Association Vice President Bruce Watzman. “We believe MSHA, if they so desired, could accommodate this by redefining how they interpret the phrase ‘in its entirety’ which guides their inspection focus.”

MSHA is already grossly underfunded and understaffed for its ostensible mission of protecting the nation’s miners. Earlier this year the agency’s budget for processing the backlog of safety citations was cut by more than \$2 million as part of the sequester cuts, while a recent US Department of Labor audit found that MSHA is already slow to review serious violations to determine if they should be referred for criminal prosecution.

However, it would be incorrect to view the impotence of

MSHA simply within the context of insufficient resources. MSHA, as an agency of the state, ultimately remains committed to the continued profitability of the US mining industry regardless of its budget. In fact, MSHA had very recently inspected two of the three operations where the first string of deaths occurred, as well as the Prosperity Mine on October 2, as one of the targeted inspections during the government shutdown.

Mine fatalities are not a technical question, but a social one. Scientific knowledge coupled with advanced technology and technique could all but eliminate the steady death toll of dozens of miners every year. However, such a progressive social development is blocked by the continued private ownership of the nation’s mines and their operation as for-profit enterprises.

Such a state of affairs is able to continue only due to the fact that the nation’s miners as yet remain insufficiently organized and politically conscious to advance their independent interests towards this end. This is part of the crisis of leadership and of perspective facing the working class. Primary responsibility for the threats to life and limb of US miners rests primarily with the United Mine Workers bureaucracy, which has betrayed every struggle waged by the miners over the last three decades while promoting the poison of nationalism and anti-communism as it integrated itself into the US mining industry.

UMW President Cecil Roberts responded to the three mining deaths with a statement in which he “urge[d] all miners, union members or not, to be especially careful at work. Check on your buddy. Watch each other’s back. Take extra precautions when operating machinery.”

And if the bankruptcy of this organization wasn’t clear enough from this line of banal advice, Roberts added, “And finally, call your members of Congress and Senators and tell them while they’re squabbling, miners are dying.”



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