Two dead, 20 injured in Colorado mining accident

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Escaping gas claimed the lives of mineworkers Nick Cappanno, 34, and Rick Williams, 59, and injured 20 others in southwestern Colorado early Sunday. The miners were overcome by carbon monoxide fumes while working at the Revenue-Virginius silver mine in the town of Ouray, 270 miles south of Denver. The two men were pronounced dead underground while their coworkers were rushed to local hospitals.

It is suspected that routine blasting, which took place the day before may have caused a "powder-smoke incident," according to Star Mine Operations site manager, Rory Williams. "I believe a blast was involved which did create some gases which potentially the miners did inhale," he said. Official spokesmen for the company could not be reached for comment.

According to Williams, workers are required to have their own personal respirators on hand while working underground. However, it has not been determined if the miners had been told to wear the breathing devices or whether they were functioning at the time of the incident.

"Anything that has been reported is speculative…We don't know what the cause is," said Ouray County spokeswoman Marti Whitmore. Representatives from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) have ordered the pit to be shut down until the source of the leak can be determined. An explosion or mine collapse have been ruled out as causes of the deaths and injuries, however.

From 1876 until the late 1940s, the historic Revenue-Virginius site has turned out nearly 14.5 million ounces of silver. The mine had recently been acquired by Star Mine Operations LLC, which officially opened the site last February. At the time of the Star Mine acquisition, the conditions of the site were said to be in "bad disrepair," with "roofs… caving in," according to a statement Williams gave to *The Watch* newspaper in 2012.

An article published in the same newspaper in August stated that work at the mine had been "proceeding feverishly" since its opening in February, "with three shifts of miners working 20 hours a day, seven days a week, and surface workers putting in 10-hour days, five days a week."

The operators who have sought to profit from the fluctuating prices of gold and silver have increased employment at the mine to nearly 100 workers, up from just five in February.

In Colorado, the mining industry employs over 12,000 workers and ranks sixth in the US for royalties from mineral extraction. In 2012, the Colorado Mining Association reported $178.4 million in royalties as well as over $2 billion in value for oil, coal, silver, and gold produced annually.

The event marks the worst mine-related accident in the state since 1981, when an explosion at the Mid-Continent Dutch Creek No. 1 site claimed the lives of 15 workers. In neighboring Utah, six coal miners and three rescue workers were killed in back-to-back cave-ins at the Crandall Canyon mine in August 2007. In that case, the new mine owner had concealed from federal safety regulators that he was engaged in retreat mining—a dangerous practice to remove coal pillars holding up the roof of a mine in order to extract the last remaining coal before a mine is abandoned

In the period from September 30, 2012 until the same time this year, MSHA has recorded 27 mine fatalities. Since 2002, Colorado has seen a total of 15 workers die in on-site tragedies.

The state was the location of the brutal Ludlow Massacre in 1914 when 18 striking miners, their wives, and children were murdered by Colorado militiamen,

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coal company guards, and private detectives hired by John D. Rockefeller. After decades of betrayed strikes and collaboration with the employers, the membership of the United Mine Workers in the state is fewer than 700.

Former UMW official Joe Main has been Assistant Secretary of Labor for Mine Safety and Health since Obama's inauguration in 2009. During this time, miners have continued to lose their lives and limbs for the profits of the mining companies.

MSHA has seen its funds slashed repeatedly, with its budget for processing the backlog of safety violations against mining operators cut by $2 million this year as a result of last winters' "sequester" agreement between Obama and Congress. This came as the agency already suffered due to under-staffing and other administrative difficulties. *The author also recommends*: https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/10/24/msha-o24.html [24 October 2013]

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