

Illinois coal miner killed on the job

Naomi Spencer
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A coal miner was crushed to death in a southern Illinois mine Wednesday afternoon, the third such fatality in the US in as many days. The MC #1 Mine, owned by billionaire coal magnate Chris Cline, was the site of a fatal accident just six months ago, and at least two other deaths since 2009.

Twenty-five-year-old William-Daniel Hans Payne of Johnston City died after he became pinned between equipment and a coal rib (wall). According to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), the accident occurred at 3:20 p.m., as Payne was “helping tram a roof bolting machine in a travel way” inside the mine. MSHA said it is investigating the accident and “sent a family liaison to assist.”

Payne leaves behind a wife, who is eight months pregnant with their first child.

The mine is operated by M-Class Mining LLC on behalf of Cline, who controls some 3 billion tons of coal reserves across the US and owns a multitude of mines via small operator companies that act to shield his private firms Foresight Reserves and The Cline Group. In recent years, Cline has spent hundreds of millions of dollars buying up mining rights and extraction equipment in Illinois.

The MC #1 operation is part of the vast Sugar Camp Energy complex in rural Franklin County. It is a retreat mine, where miners extract support pillars from previously mined areas, allowing the roof to collapse as they work their way out. This dangerous practice is a method operators use to maximize production at older mine sites.

MSHA records indicate that some 218 miners extracted more than 1.5 million tons of coal from MC #1 in the first quarter of this year. Since Cline acquired the mine in 2010, coal tonnage has increased 20 times over at the mine, from 324,000 to nearly 6.5 million in 2013.

The mine is nonunion, and employs many

contractors, sometimes inexperienced, with no job security. The area is poor and decent-paying jobs are scarce. In Thompsonville, the nearest town, one in six live below the official poverty line and official unemployment stands at 18 percent. In William-Daniel Hans Payne’s hometown of Johnston City, per capita income stands at just \$14,800.

The desperate conditions that exist in America’s mining regions are considered part of the attractive array of resources—from land, transit routes, timber, gas and minerals—available to those with the money to purchase swaths of land.

Cline is an especially aggressive investor and cost cutter, making him a darling of the industry and its investors. In its annual list of the wealthiest 400 Americans, *Forbes* magazine lauded Cline as the “one bright spot” in the coal industry because of his expansion in Illinois. Cline’s mining costs were “roughly \$22 per ton...significantly lower than the \$50 per ton incurred at the average mine east of the Mississippi.”

The ruthless pace of production coupled with disregard for basic safety creates a state of imminent danger for miners. In fact, the MC #1 Mine was cited for over 170 “significant and substantial” (S&S) violations under MSHA’s guidelines in the course of the past 12 months. The S&S designation is reserved for hazards that present the danger of death and necessitate the immediate halting of operations. This is more than three times MSHA’s threshold for designating a “pattern of violations” and more than five times the national average for mines of similar size and type.

Since January, MC #1 has been cited over 300 times for safety violations. In the past year, it has been the scene of 40 accidents, most of them causing injuries.

The Obama administration’s “pattern of violations” designation, introduced in the wake of the Upper Big

Branch mine disaster four years ago, is exposed by the continual stream of accidents and deaths to be nothing but a cover for the industry and the governmental agencies charged with overseeing it. Despite the horrendous safety record of MC #1, MSHA does not classify the site as a pattern violator.



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