

Pennsylvania records first US mine fatalities of 2015

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Pennsylvania has recorded the first two mine fatalities in the United States for 2015. Last year, 42 miners died in US mines, including 16 in the coal mining industry, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

On February 20, 29-year-old Todd Trimble was crushed in a roof fall at the Heilwood mine in Indiana County, Pennsylvania. According to MSHA's preliminary report, Trimble, a roof bolter helper with just under four years' experience, was working on repositioning roof mesh for the next row of permanent supports when he was pinned between a piece of roof rock and the top of the drill canopy.

Trimble was freed by other miners and transported to the surface where he was pronounced dead a short time later. He leaves behind a wife and two daughters, ages one and three.

Trimble's death comes just three weeks after 43-year-old continuous miner operator Rick Kline was crushed to death at the Brubaker Mine in Somerset County. Since it was opened in 2008, the Brubaker has recorded accident rates twice the national average. Kline had more than 10 years' experience in the mines and left behind a wife, son and daughter.

Trimble is the first mine fatality at Heilwood since it was opened by Rosebud Mining Company in 2008. Like the Brubaker Mine where Kline died, the Heilwood is a small, nonunion operation, which produced about 300,000 tons of coal last year, according to MSHA data.

Rosebud is owned by multi-millionaire J. Clifford Forrest III, who also owns Chemstream Holdings, the parent company of the now-bankrupt Freedom Industries, which was responsible for the devastating January 9, 2014, chemical spill in Charleston, West Virginia. The spill affected 300,000 West Virginians in

nine counties, contaminating the drinking water for weeks.

The US Department of Labor sued Rosebud in late 2010, after it caught the company providing advanced warning of the arrival of MSHA inspectors at two company mines. Based on their poor safety records, the two mines had been targeted by the agency for surprise impact inspections in the aftermath of the explosion at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine, which killed 29 West Virginia miners earlier that year.

At the end of last year, Rosebud reached an \$86-million deal with Alpha Natural Resources for the acquisition of Alpha subsidiary Amfire Mining Company. The sale included five underground mines, five surface mines, four preparation plants and a loading facility in central and southwestern Pennsylvania. In preparation for the transfer, Alpha reduced its workforce at the operations by 412, only about 140 of which Rosebud planned to rehire.

The downsizing at Amfire was part of a national wave of production cuts and "<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/13/coal-j13.html>" layoffs throughout the coal industry, which has continued into 2015. While hundreds of US coal mines have closed in recent years, more than 17,000 coal miners have been laid off since the start of 2012, including more than 400 at Alpha operations in West Virginia and Kentucky in the second half of 2014 alone. The company has also announced it will be closing its Emerald Mine in Greene County, Pennsylvania, later this year, which currently employs about 500 workers.

The production cuts and layoffs are being driven by a crisis in US coal production, which has been exacerbated by the lingering economic crisis. In the domestic market, cheap and abundant natural gas continues to compete favorably with thermal coal for

domestic energy production. At the same time, the slowdown in the global economy has tempered demand for metallurgical coal exported to foreign markets for steel production.

As the wave of layoffs and mine closures demonstrate, the economic pressures on the mining industry inevitably translate into increased exploitation and the erosion of safety conditions. Coal miners, however, have no organization or political strategy to wage a successful struggle against the coal operators and their government backers in both big business parties.

Southwestern Pennsylvania—where the two fatalities occurred—was once a stronghold of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which, after decades of betrayed strikes and collaboration with the coal bosses in the destruction of jobs and work conditions, is little more than a bureaucratic shell today. Achievements won by coal miners dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, like the eight-hour day and basic safety provisions, have been decimated. The collapse of the UMWA led to the proliferation of nonunion operations like those where Todd Trimble and Rick Kline were killed.

Even as markets for coal decline, the \$30 billion-a-year US industry continues to make large profits at the expense of the lives and limbs of coal miners. These conditions will lead to a revival of the region's rich traditions of working class struggle.



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