

Illinois coal miner killed on the job

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On December 8, 20-year-old Tyler D. Rath was struck by a piece of mining equipment as he worked underground at the MC #1 mine in Macedonia, Illinois. The mine is part of the sprawling Sugar Camp Energy complex, operated by M-Class Mining LLC on behalf of the mine owner, Foresight Energy.

The accident brings to 11 the number of coal miners killed on the job in the US this year, and the third fatal accident in as many years at the mine according to data from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Preliminary autopsy results found Rath died from blunt trauma to the head, neck, trunk, and extremities. The MSHA preliminary report lists both the time of the accident and the time of death at 7:53 p.m., suggesting that he was killed instantly.

Rath, a supply man in the mine, was hauling equipment down a long, steep slope using a tractor and trailer. He was “unable to negotiate the left turn at the crosscut at the bottom of the slope and impacted the coal rib,” or the wall of the mine. The heavy trailer broke free of the tractor, smashing into the driver’s compartment, crushing Rath. His body was brought to the surface at around 11:30 p.m., where the coroner pronounced him dead.

Rath had been a coal miner since he turned 18, and leaves behind a wife, two-year-old daughter, and six-day-old son. “I’m just waiting to wake up and it all be gone,” his wife, Alisha, told the *Southern Illinoisan* newspaper. “It doesn’t seem real at all.”

“He risked his life every day to support his family,” Alisha added. “He loved his job. It’s good because it supports your family, but as a wife you always have that fear of getting the ring on the door or getting a phone call that something has happened.

“It is literally a nightmare. I wouldn’t wish this upon my worst enemy.”

Retired coal miner Les Summers, who lives near the

M-Class mine, told WSIL news channel 3 that the operation was notorious for safety problems. “I’ve talked to the other people that’s not in the mine and they were very concerned over the safety of the men and the conditions,” he said. “If guys would’ve known what was going to happen, they wouldn’t have went to work that night.”

WSIL noted that Summers expressed widely held concerns: “Residents had plenty to say about the mine’s operation, though none would speak on the record, for fear of reprisals by the company.”

Behind the M-Class limited liability company stands Foresight Energy, owned by billionaire coal baron Chris Cline. Earlier this year, coal operator Bob Murray’s company Murray Energy also acquired a “significant economic interest” in the Macedonia mining complex. MSHA lists both companies as operators of the MC #1 mine in its database.

Cline acquired the mine in 2010, in the midst of a massive buying spree and consolidation of coal mine holdings in the industry. Since then, the price of coal has plummeted, and operators have sought to squeeze higher production rates out of the workforce at larger mines across the Illinois coal basin, while shuttering smaller operations and laying off thousands.

Since Cline bought MC #1, annual coal tonnage increased by 20 times at the mine. It is a non-union operation, employing more than 400 employees and contractors. The positions are dangerous and offer little job security, in a region rife with unemployment and low-wage job prospects.

Since 2009, at least five miners have been killed in the pit, including two contractors. In the past year, at least 20 miners were injured, and MSHA cited 290 safety violations before the latest accident. Seventy-eight of those violations were considered “significant and substantial” (S&S). MSHA does not consider the mine as having a “pattern of violations,” even though

the S&S designation is reserved for hazards considered to present the danger of death and necessitate immediate halting of production.

In 2014, a coal miner died after being crushed between a piece of equipment and a coal rib in a travelway area similar to the site of the December 8 accident. That accident came on the heels of another fatality at the mine six months before, when a miner was crushed in a roof collapse.



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