

Three US coal miners killed in three weeks

Naomi Spencer
22 January 2016

Three US coal miners have died in separate accidents 19 days into the new year, the highest number to occur in such a period since 2006. The deaths come amidst mass layoffs across the mining sector, leading to corner-cutting on the part of operators and pressure on remaining miners to work under dangerous conditions without raising concerns.

On January 19, 36-year-old Nathan Phillips was killed as he operated a continuous mining machine in the western Kentucky Dotiki Mine.

A preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) states that Phillips “received fatal crushing injuries when he was pinned between the tail of the continuous mining machine and the inby coal rib in the last open crosscut” between two entryways. He was pinned to the wall by the machine; Phillips was freed by co-workers, then taken to a Louisville hospital where he was declared dead.

The Dotiki Mine is a massive operation owned by Alliance Resource Partners and operated by Webster County Coal LLC. It is a nonunion underground mine employing 391 miners.

In 2010, two continuous mine operators were killed in the mine when a 70-foot slab of the roof fell on them. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, the Dotiki Mine was cited hundreds of times a year for safety violations, with one in three of them being “significant and substantial” (S&S) hazards, so called because they pose an imminent threat to the lives of miners on the job.

In the years since, the mine’s safety record is unchanged, and the federal safety agency does not classify it as having a “pattern of violations” that would enable inspectors to halt production until problems have been corrected. In 2015, the Dotiki Mine was cited 348 times, of which 91 were classified S&S violations. Seven workers were injured on the job last year, several from falls of the roof or wall.

Alliance Resource Partners is a billion-dollar company long lauded as a “standout performer” in the face of declining coal profits. As other large companies declined, Alliance saw growth in its profits and dividends every year since 2005.

This changed in March 2015, as commodities markets declined worldwide. The company’s coal sales continued to increase, but not enough to compensate for falling coal prices. Like other operators in the energy market, Alliance has sought to offload the impact of the global economic crisis onto its workforce by cutting employees, benefits and working conditions.

On Saturday evening, January 16, 31-year-old Jeremy R. Neice of Boone County was killed in an accident at the Mepco 4 West Mine in Greene County, Pennsylvania. Neice, who had 12 years’ mining experience, was also a continuous mine operator.

MSHA reported that Neice was operating a continuous mining machine when a large chunk of coal rib (wall) fell and pinned him to the mine floor. First responders freed him from the rubble, transported him to the surface and took him by ambulance to the nearest hospital in Morgantown, where he was declared dead.

The 4 West Mine is listed as a nonunion mine employing 405 workers, 369 of them underground. At the time of the accident, 72 miners were on shift.

Located some 50 miles south of Pittsburgh, the mine is operated by limited liability companies Dana Mining and Mepco Intermediate Holdings with mailing addresses in Morgantown, West Virginia.

MSHA lists the parent company as GenPower Holdings LP, and the owner as James L. Laurita, Jr. Laurita is the former chairman of the West Virginia Coal Association, the powerful industry lobby in the state.

Few other details about the accident have been released as of this writing. Brian M. Osborn, Mepco senior vice president, told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

that the company was “deeply saddened by the loss” and extended “heartfelt thoughts and prayers to Jeremy’s family, to all our employees, and to all who knew Jeremy.” Osborn reportedly declined to provide the newspaper any further information about the accident.

The Dana/Mepco 4 West Mine was the site of another fatal accident last summer. Fifty-five-year-old John W. Kelly of Albright, West Virginia, was crushed on June 28 when a set of airlock doors and frames fell on him. Kelly had worked at the mine for 10 years at the time of his death.

The MSHA database lists 17 accidents at the mine last year, most of them involving collapses of the roof or walls. MSHA inspectors cited the 4 West Mine 284 times for safety violations in 2015. Of those, 87 citations were for S&S hazards.

One employee expressed the opinion on Facebook that “Dana mining is one of the most dangerous mines in Pennsylvania to work at.” Another commented, following a gas well explosion above the mine in February 2014, that the company was rash to allow work to continue down below: “as long as coal is on the belt, it’s all good to them ... that’s all they care about.”

Niece’s death follows a January 4 fatality in southern West Virginia, the first of 2016. Peter Dale Sprouse of Clear Fork was killed in a belt roller accident at Greenbrier Minerals LLC’s Lower War Eagle Mine in Wyoming County. Sprouse, a 53-year-old section foreman in the mine, had nearly 35 years of mining experience. According to the MSHA accident report, Sprouse “became entangled in a moving underground belt conveyer” while attempting to change out a roller. His body was found by co-workers at about 1 a.m.

The MSHA database records 11 injuries at the Lower War Eagle Mine in 2015, and lists 262 citations for safety violations. Sixty-two of the violations are classified as S&S. In the past month, MSHA cited 11 violations, including for inadequate protections against roof, face and rib falls, problems with electrical and firefighting equipment.

The mine is owned by another limited liability company, Coronado Coal LLC of Connecticut. Coronado was formed in 2011 to acquire coal assets for the private investment firm Energy and Minerals Group (EMG).

Like so many LLCs in the mining industry, Coronado operates as a legal shield for its owners. Many LLCs are incorporated at the local level but are ultimately owned and controlled by global hedge funds and financial asset strippers. On its corporate web site, EMG boasts of assets totaling \$16.8 billion and a long list of acquisitions and “partnerships” across the crisis-wracked US and world coal industry.

The company bought Greenbrier Minerals in 2013 from Cliffs Natural Resources, one of many coal companies weighing bankruptcy in the past few years.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact