

Two more US coal miners killed

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Two accidents claimed the lives of coal miners in the central coalfields region of Appalachia, bringing to five the total number of coal miners killed on the job in 2017. Joseph W. Partin of Williamsburg, Kentucky, and Dennis Fillinger of Harts, West Virginia, were both killed by rock falls.

Partin, 33, was an auger operator at the Green Hill Mining Company's surface mine #51 in Whitley County, Kentucky. On March 30, according to the preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Partin was "changing worn cutter head bits at the front of the Salem Multi-head auger machine" when he was "struck by a rock approximately 4 feet by 5 feet by 30 inches that fell from the bottom section of the highwall." He was pronounced dead at the scene. Partin had eight years' experience in mining.

As with the three other fatal accidents so far in 2017, Partin's death came as he worked in relative isolation. Only one other employee was at the mine at the time of the accident, which occurred around 2:09 a.m., according to MSHA. The Green Hill Mine #51 employs only five miners in total.

Fillinger, 62, was a section foreman at the underground C K Coal Corporation's Mine No. 5 in Mingo County in southern West Virginia. On February 23, Fillinger was struck by a piece of rock "approximately 3 feet wide by 2 feet long by 3 to 4 inches thick," MSHA reports. He was administered first aid and then transported to a local medical center, where he remained hospitalized until succumbing to his injuries April 6. Fillinger had 38 years' total experience in coal mining, but had worked only 10 weeks at the C K Coal operation.

Every fatal accident since the start of the year has occurred at coal mines in West Virginia or eastern Kentucky. This area, once a center for mining in the US and internationally, has seen output decimated by the

collapse in global demand for metallurgical coal, competition from natural gas, which surpassed coal as the chief source of domestic electrical power generation in 2015, and the geological depletion of the narrow coal seams of the region.

The coal companies have laid off tens of thousands of miners and used the bankruptcy courts to escape health care and pension obligations, while relying on the pro-company United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to suppress opposition.

The current number of coal mining jobs in West Virginia and Kentucky has dwindled to a few thousand. In eastern Kentucky, only 3,742 coal miners remain—down from 14,373 in 2010. Between 1971 and 1988, Kentucky was the country's largest coal-producing state, and the second largest until 1994. Since 2000, state data shows, quarterly coal production has plummeted from 35 million tons to just over 10 million tons. In 2016 alone, coal production fell by more than 40 percent.

The West Virginia State Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training reports as of March, 12,649 miners are working at 99 mines in the state. Since 2009, the mining workforce has fallen by about 8,000, and those who remain on the job face more-dangerous working conditions, ramped-up production demands, and the constant threat of furlough or mine closure. Since January 31, state data records 598 accidents at mining sites.

While politicians, the media, and the operators have in the past paid lip service to the tragedies befalling miners' families and their communities, coal mine fatalities are treated largely as a cost of doing business. When accidents kill, the victims are portrayed as stoic figures, aware of the dangers of their industry, dying "doing what they love." In the meantime, the coal bosses—including Trump's new commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, the former owner of the deadly Sago

Mine, where 12 West Virginia miners were killed in 2006—literally get away with murder.

Former mining communities have collapsed into poverty, mass unemployment, and social despair. It is not a coincidence that the areas hardest hit by the decline in coal voted in the highest percentages for Trump, who campaigned on promises to revitalize the American coal industry by putting an end to “the war on coal”—a canard used by the right-wing to blame the most tepid regulations for the historic decline in the industry.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, some 22,600 retirees and widows face having benefits cut off April 30, after Patriot Coal—a spinoff of Peabody Coal, the world’s largest private coal company—filed for bankruptcy. Miners are also being hit by a sharp rise in the deadliest form of black lung disease.

On March 28, President Trump signed an executive order for “energy independence” to further roll back safety and environmental regulations on the energy sector. In introducing the order, Trump said it called for the “immediate reevaluation of the so-called Clean Power Plan”; “lifting the ban on federal leasing for coal production”; “lifting job-killing restrictions on the production of oil, natural gas, clean coal, and shale energy”; and “returning power to the states” (see “Trump launches pollution deregulation offensive”).

In both West Virginia and Kentucky, state governments are moving in tandem with the Trump administration to gut already weak regulations in safety, health, and environmental oversight. This will ensure that there are even more deaths and environmental catastrophes.

The West Virginia legislature last month introduced a bill that would strip state safety inspectors of their inspection authority and instead mandate them only to conduct “compliance visits and education.” Regulators would likewise be unable to issue citations and fines for health and safety violations. An updated version presented as a compromise backs off on some of the most sweeping changes to regulatory agencies but guts the state’s Department of Environmental Protection definition of a healthy stream, essentially giving coal companies a pass to destroy water quality. A separate bill, signed by Democratic governor and coal executive Jim Justice April 11, allows for increased industrial and mining pollution discharges into rivers and streams.

In Kentucky, the state Senate ~~approved~~ a to reduce coal mine inspections and replace some safety inspections with “mine safety analysis visits.” The bill also reduces electrical inspections of mines from a mere two per year to one.

Inspectors would base their “analyses” on interviews with coal miners, a measure that shifts the focus of inspections from operator safety protocol to the behavior of individual miners. In a statement to WYMT news, Kentucky Coal Association President Tyler White defended the change, declaring, “Why just look at conditions when we know behavior is a major player in preventing mine accidents?”

The shift will put more pressure on coal miners who are already facing the threat of losing their jobs for reporting safety hazards or demanding better working conditions in the mines. It also sets the stage to put further blame on the workers themselves in the event of accidents or safety violations, sheltering the operator and executives responsible.

The UMWA, which quietly vacated the state with the closure of the last union mine in Kentucky in 2015, has nothing to offer coal miners who will bear the brunt of these dangerous policies. In fact, the UMWA has rallied behind the loosening of regulations from the Trump administration and sought to sow fresh illusions in the prospects for a coal revival. While the UMWA has been muted on the state-level attacks on regulations, in part because of their appallingly pro-business character and consequent unpopularity in mining communities, the union proudly announces on its web site that it “led the fight against a series of regulations coming out of Washington that threaten jobs in the coal industry and other industries that depend on coal.”



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