

# US coal mining fatalities nearly doubled in 2017

**Clement Daly**  
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Coal mining fatalities in the US nearly doubled in 2017 from a record low of eight in 2016 to 15 last year. An additional 13 miners were killed in metal and non-metal mines throughout the country in 2017.

According to preliminary figures from the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), West Virginia led the nation in coal mining fatalities with eight last year, followed by Kentucky with two, and one each in Alabama, Colorado, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming.

The nation's underground mines continue to be the most dangerous. Of the 15 fatalities, nine were at underground mines, three occurred at surface mines, and three were at coal preparation plants. The deadly operations ranged from underground mines employing more than 400 to surface operations and preparation plants employing as few as five miners.

The surge in coal mining fatalities takes place amidst a modest revival of US coal production last year after a five-year plunge which led to hundreds of mine closures and mass layoffs. The coal industry has sought to exploit the crisis to carry out a general restructuring of the industry and shift the burden of the long-term decline of US coal production onto the backs of the coal miners and the working class as a whole.

Through the bankruptcy courts, scores of energy companies have shredded contracts, attacked living standards and working conditions, escaped environmental clean-up obligations, and cleared their ledgers of long-term legacy liabilities such as pensions and healthcare commitments won by miners through decades of struggles.

The sharp downturn in the US coal industry is driven fundamentally by the global economic forces, such as the decline in exports to emerging economies experiencing slowing growth, particularly China. On the home front, coal is waging a losing struggle with cheap and abundant natural gas for share in the domestic energy market. According to MSHA data, US coal production plunged from just under 1.1 billion tons in 2011 to 736 million tons in 2016 – a drop of 32 percent in five years.

However, in its recent Weekly Coal Production Report for the week ending on December 30, the US Energy Information Agency (EIA) noted that “US year-to-date coal production totaled 770.9[million tons], 6.1% higher than the comparable

year-to-date coal production in 2016.” The EIA also noted that coal production in West Virginia, where the majority of the fatalities occurred, has increased by 16 percent in 2017, including a 25 percent increase in the state's southern coalfields.

While the Trump administration has sought to roll back regulations on the coal industry and posture as an ally of coal miners, the modest revival in coal production last year was largely the result of a slight rise in natural gas prices and increased demand for metallurgical coal from China. However, most analysts do not expect this trend to arrest the long-term forecasted decline of the US coal industry.

The decline in coal mining fatalities to the lowest on record in 2016 was the direct byproduct of the collapse in coal production and employment. According to MSHA, the number of operating coal mines declined by one-third, from 1,996 in 2012 to 1,325 in 2016. Meanwhile, coal employment plunged by 40,000, from 89,700 to 49,700 over the same period, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The BLS records an uptick in coal employment of 2,000 with the slight production increase in 2017.

Thus, the nearly doubling of coal mine fatalities in 2017 which has accompanied the modest production and employment gains of the year not only reveals the illusory character of the safety record hailed at the time by the outgoing Obama administration. It also underscores the sharp deterioration of working conditions and the deepening of exploitation in the US coal industry. Those miners still employed in the shrinking industry are increasingly forced to relocate in search of work and are pressured into ignoring deteriorating safety conditions.

A review of last year's 15 coal fatalities bears this out. Of the 14 fatalities for which detailed information is available, 9 happened to experienced coal miners with less than one year at the mine they were killed. Two additional experienced miners were killed with less than two years at the mine they were employed.

For example, Franklin L. Vannoy, a 54-year-old contract truck driver with more than ten years of experience was killed in February at Coronado Coal's Elk Lick tipple in Logan County, West Virginia after his truck overturned on him while

he was dumping a load of frozen coal. The accident occurred on Vannoy's third day working at the facility.

Similarly, 28-year-old Andrew Oxenrider was killed in July by the bulldozer he was operating at the New St. Nicholas Breaker Preparation Plant in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. Oxenrider had more than seven years of mining experience, but had worked only a week and five days at the plant. In its final report on the accident, MSHA concluded the bulldozer "was not maintained in safe operating condition" and had a "defective parking brake spring and linkage assembly."

In an indication of the working conditions at the operation, it is not known why Oxenrider had exited the bulldozer because there were no witnesses to the accident. He had arrived for work at 6:00 a.m. and was the only miner working at the time of the accident. He was found dead at approximately 9:30 a.m. when a foreman arrived on site. According to MSHA, "The Non-Fatal Days Lost (NFDL) injury incidence rate for the facility in 2016 was 12.64, compared to a national NFDL rate of 3.24."

In fact, the conditions existing at the New St. Nicholas Breaker plant are not unique. With last year's uptick in coal production, operators are pressuring coal miners for increased productivity and many mines are operating with what amounts to skeleton crews. Of the 14 accidents for which there is detailed information, ten of them occurred at operations in which less than one-third of the workforce was working at the time of the accident.

Joseph W. Partin, a 33-year-old auger operator with eight years' experience was killed in a rock fall at a Kentucky surface mine in March. He was working with just one other miner at the operation and had been at the mine for only 14 weeks.

The third fatality of 2017 occurred at the Bishop Preparation Plant in McDowell County, West Virginia when 43-year-old Jason Kenneth Matthews plunged more than 18 feet from a plate press he was repairing onto a moving conveyor belt which sent him down another 10-foot drop into a coal refuse transfer chute. Matthews, who was working alone when the accident occurred, had more than 13 years of mining experience, but had been at the operation only 16 weeks.

Matthews' death had particular political significance since the operation is owned by West Virginia's billionaire governor, Jim Justice. According to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*, Justice's senior vice president for safety and health, Patrick Graham, sought to contest citations issued from the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training for the company's failure to provide adequate fall protection. In doing so, Graham revived the well-worn corporate tactic of blaming the victim.

"What he failed to do was to use fall protection," Graham said at a West Virginia Board of Coal Mine Health and Safety meeting in April. "Matthews should have had his, and he was trained to do that."

"The real question is what goes through a person's mind, in human behavior, when he's working by himself and nobody's watching," Graham complained. "It's like a coal miner mentality, you know. 'I can do this and maybe I don't need to do a particular safety precaution.' When we can cure that kind of problem, it wouldn't happen here. He had been wearing his harness before. He had been trained to wear it. It's not like the employees weren't trained."

However, while MSHA later found in its investigation that Matthews "was not wearing or using any type of fall protection at the time of the accident," it concluded that his company-provided safety harness was likely found on the floor next to his ladder because "There was no safe means of access on the top of the plate press, and no means of tying off while on top of the plate press was provided."

Last year's fatalities demonstrate that the United Mine Workers of America, which has been hollowed out as an organization after decades of class collaboration with the coal companies, and the other operators' unions common at surface mines, offer no additional level of safety protection. Of the 14 fatalities with detailed records available, a full half were union members.

It is also worth noting that the recorded fatalities do not include the hundreds of retired coal miners who died last year of occupational diseases such as black lung and silicosis from their years in the mines.

As numerous studies continue to document the dramatic rise in the number and severity of cases of black lung, the Trump administration announced in December that it will be reviewing the revised coal dust standards implemented by the Obama administration in 2014 in its drive to reduce regulations on American industry. MSHA, now under the leadership of former coal executive David Zatezalo, will review the coal dust standards to see if they "could be improved or made more effective or less burdensome."



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