

370 miners to lose their jobs at Pennsylvania coal mine

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Some 370 coal miners will lose their jobs, with layoffs starting next month, due to the planned closure of the 4 West Mine in southwestern Pennsylvania.

On March 2, 191 miners will be thrown out of work when the 4 West Mine, located in Greene County, about 60 miles south of Pittsburgh near the West Virginia border, stops coal production. Another 175 miners will be laid off by June 1 after the company removes underground equipment and seals the mine. Another four miners will be let go when the mine officially closes on December 31.

The mine is operated by Dana Mining Company, which is owned by Mepco LLC. It provided coal for a nearby power plant operated by a related company. The company said it was able to buy outside coal cheaper than could be produced at their own mine.

“The mine is being permanently closed because the aging of the mine and adverse geological conditions have impaired the productivity of the mine and forced higher costs of coal production,” Brian Osborn, senior vice president of operations at Mepco, told the *Greene County Messenger*.

“The 4 West Mine simply can’t compete in today’s steam coal market as most of our competitors have the advantage of better mining conditions and the higher production rates associated with longwall mining,” added Osborn.

The closure will be another blow to workers living in the area, which already suffers from high unemployment and poverty. It is estimated that for every coal mining job destroyed, another five people will lose their jobs in supporting industries.

“This is going to be devastating,” a coal miner from another mine told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“The coal companies just took as much as they can and leaving the people with nothing. These people have families to support,” he said, noting that there were no

other jobs in the area.

“The gas companies are doing the same thing. Greene and (neighboring) Fayette County are two of the three poorest counties in Pennsylvania, yet you see gas drilling everywhere.

“A few people make some money, but most people end up with nothing and now have to drive on even worse roads than they had before because they have been torn up by the gas trucks driving up and down them.”

Fewer than half of the population is in the labor force. The median household income in the county is 10 percent below the state average and one in every seven residents live in poverty.

After the mine closes there will be just two underground mines in the entire county. Consol Energy operates the Bailey mine complex, and the Cumberland Mine near Waynesburg is owned Contura Energy Inc., which was formed out of the bankruptcy of Alpha Natural Resources.

Greene County once had a dozen major mines and many smaller ones, with thousands of coal miners employed there. Most closed in the 1980s and 90s. The most recent closure was in 2015, when the Emerald Mine near Waynesburg was closed, throwing 500 miners out of work.

Workers at the Bailey complex are also worried that their jobs may not last long. The Bailey complex consists of three underground mines: Bailey, Enlow Fork and the Harvey mine. They are the largest underground mines in the country, running five long wall and 15-17 continuous miner sections. The three mines are able to produce on average 26 million tons of coal each year.

In November of last year Consol split into two companies, one controlling the coal mines and the other its more profitable natural gas business. The mine side of the business was saddled with \$908 million in Consol debt.

“We are just running coal, they are not spending

anything on maintenance to keep the equipment going,” a miner at the Bailey complex told the WWSWS.

Consol, in its most recent statement, shows that it sold 100 percent of its coal produced in the last quarter for 2017, making it a record production year. In a presentation to investors earlier this month, the company stated that it already has contracts to sell 70 percent of coal produced this year and 24 percent in 2019.

“They don’t care about the miners,” said the miner at the Bailey complex. “They’ve already eliminated our health benefits and they are just trying to make as much money as they can. When the company cut the health benefits, some of the older miners were given cash settlements and some were substantial, \$75,000 or \$100,000. But in reality, that only pays for insurance for four or five years and if you or your wife ends up with cancer or something, that money will be gone very fast.”

Greene County voted by nearly a 70 percent margin for Trump in the 2016 presidential elections, largely due to his demagogic promise to bring back coal jobs and anger at the Obama administration over mine closures and layoffs that have exacerbated the conditions of grinding poverty facing many in the area.

Since the election, the Trump administration has helped fatten the profits of the coal companies through tax cuts and reduced environmental and safety regulations. While there was a modest increase in coal production in 2017, the benefits have largely gone to the coal operators. Miners meanwhile saw fatalities last year nearly double.

For its part Consol states that it will see “significant benefits ... in 2018 and beyond under the new tax laws.” Consol is set to gain \$250 million from the Trump administration tax cuts for the wealthy. Meanwhile, the Trump’s budget proposal for 2019 cuts training programs for laid-off miners.



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