

Underground worker killed in collapse at Nevada gold mine

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Jason Holman, a 42-year-old underground mineworker from Goshen, Utah, was killed on October 25 in a collapse at the Lee Smith gold mine, 50 miles north of Elko, Nevada. Few details have been released, but according to a preliminary report from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Holman, a powderman, was loading explosives into the rock-face when a 150-ton portion of the mine ceiling fell and “a portion of this cemented backfill, weighing approximately 5 tons, landed on top of the miner.” He appears to have died instantly. The incident is still under investigation by MSHA.

Holman leaves behind three children—McKade, Tyson and Jaycee—and a loving family. The family could not be reached for additional comments, but his brother Shawn published a tribute on Facebook saying, “one of his goals he was working for and saving toward was taking his daughter Jaycee to Disneyland for the very first time.” According to the gofundme page set up by his family to pay for funeral arrangements, Jason was an avid outdoorsman who liked to hunt, fish and camp. At the time of this writing, the page has raised over \$4,400, donated in small sums by other mineworkers and their families.

By all accounts, Holman was well-liked and respected by his coworkers. He had worked as an underground miner for 13 years, including 28 weeks at the Lee Smith mine prior to his death. The Lee Smith mine is one of many underground gold mines in Jerritt Canyon, a mining complex in the isolated Independence Mountains mining district of Northern Nevada that has seen a boom in gold extraction since the 1980s.

The Lee Smith Mine reaches depths of over 1000 feet below the surface. Small Mine Development, the contractor operating the mine, uses underhand mining

with cemented backfill to extract the ore. This method was developed to facilitate hard rock mining in deep mines with poor ground conditions. Among two other mines, underhand cut and cemented backfill was developed and tested in the Lucky Friday silver mine in Mullen, Idaho.

Lucky Friday is the deepest mine in the United States, at nearly two miles below the surface. Two hundred and thirty mineworkers there have been on strike since March 2017 and have repeatedly rebuffed attempts by the United Steelworkers union to force them to accept a concessions contract that would reduce health benefits and compromise safety in the interests of profits.

The Lee Smith Mine was purchased out of bankruptcy in 2015, along with the entire Jerritt Canyon complex, by Jerritt Canyon Gold LLC, owned by Canadian billionaire Eric Sprott. Speaking to the *Elko Daily Free Press* after the buyout, Jerritt Canyon Gold’s CEO, Greg Gibson, promised an increase in gold production, saying that Sprott “is of the belief that there are a lot more ounces to come out of Jerritt Canyon.”

Sprott is one of the largest gold equity holders in North America. He purchases mines around the world, speculating that as gold prices rise and the global economy spirals into crisis, he will profit. Speaking earlier this month at the Precious Metals Investment Symposium in Perth, Australia, Sprott said, “If you were right on gold in 2000, on average you made 1700 per cent. Do it once, you’re set for life,” he said, touting his investment strategy as “stealing value.”

The mineworkers who dig the precious metals face dangerous conditions as a rule. In 2014, MSHA issued Veris Gold, the previous owner, 60 citations for safety violations at the Jerritt Canyon Complex. In 2015,

Jason Potter, a 26-year-old jumbo drill operator, was killed at the Jerriitt Canyon complex's SSX Mine (also operated by Small Mine Development) when a 13-foot-long drill bit struck him. The MSHA report found management at fault for inadequate safety training. Just 10 days before Jason Holman's death, two workers were injured in a steam explosion at the Jerriitt Canyon Mill.

An underground miner who works in a mine adjacent to Lee Smith spoke anonymously to the WSWWS about the conditions facing underground mineworkers. "Personally, for me, each shift as I enter the mine, I think about my friends that had passed and make a commitment to myself to come out safe ... it is dangerous and there is no way to be 100 percent safe. If a miner isn't scared each time they enter the hole, they aren't ready to mine."

Jason Holman's death was the 14th metal and nonmetal mining fatality the US in 2018, and the 22nd including fatalities in the coal industry.

Fatalities in the mining industry are a component of the rising rates of workplace injuries and deaths in the US as a whole, as both the Republicans and the Democrats roll back regulations and the corporations, with the assistance of the unions, cut wages and benefits and sacrifice safety for greater output and profit.

Some of the deadly mining accidents in recent years occurred under the Obama administration, which appointed former United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) safety official Joe Main to head MSHA. Among these accidents was the disaster at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia, which killed 29 of the 31 coal miners at the mine.

The Trump administration has frozen new and pending regulations and is reviewing existing regulations in order to roll them back. Trump's head of MSHA, former coal executive David Zatezalo, is overseeing a review of protections against the dust and emissions that contribute to skyrocketing rates of black lung disease among Appalachian coal miners.

As corporations bring in record profits, workers have seen a decade's worth of declining wages and are working longer hours for fewer benefits, in hazardous conditions. At least 150 workers die every day from hazardous conditions, and according to the most recent government data, 2016 saw a 7 percent increase in

workers killed on the job—up to 5,190 from 4,836 in 2015.

Other miners killed this month include:

Roger W. Herndon, 33, an auger helper at the Princess Polly Anna & JCT Enterprises LLC Surface Mine #1, in Greenbrier County, West Virginia, who was fatally injured on October 17 when he was struck by a piece of auger drill steel.

Brendan DeMaster, 40, of North Royalton, Ohio, a miner with 20 years experience, who was fatally injured October 2 at an underground zinc mine, which just opened in June in Gouverneur, New York. DeMaster was struck by a sudden burst of stemming sand, which had been ejected from a borehole that was being cleaned with high pressure air.

An 18-year-old miner, Anthony David Montoya of Hollis, Oklahoma, was fatally mauled by a grizzly bear while working at a remote silver mine in Alaska on October 1. He was working at a drill site on the edge of the Hecla Greens Creek Mine, one of the world's largest silver producers, located about 18 miles south of Juneau on Admiralty Island.

October has been particularly deadly for miners throughout the world.

Twenty-one coal miners were killed in eastern China after a tunnel where 22 miners were working was blocked at both ends by coal after pressure caused rocks to fracture and break on October 20. The Longyun Coal Mining Co. Ltd. is located in Yuncheng County in Shandong province.

A 46-year-old miner in South Africa was also killed by head injuries suffered in an underground accident at Lonmin's platinum mine. Lonmin, the world's third largest platinum producer, is notorious for the Marikana massacre in August 2012. Seventeen striking miners were murdered and another 78 wounded when South African security forces opened fire on them during a series of violent assaults, which began when union officials from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) opened fire on rebellious miners.



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