

Workers killed in New York state helicopter crash and zinc mine accidents

Steve Filips**12 November 2018**

Workplace accidents that claimed the lives of workers throughout New York state over the last several weeks highlighted the sacrifice of worker safety to maximize profits.

In Beekmantown, New York, near the Canadian border adjacent to Plattsburgh, two utility workers were killed on October 30 when the helicopter they were in hit power lines, burst into flames and crashed to the ground. The four-person crew was reportedly installing a fiber optic line onto the transmission lines from the helicopter when it became entangled in the lines. They were forced to jump 40 feet to escape the burning aircraft.

Jeremy P. Kearns 30, a Northline Utilities linesman from Massena, New York, and Robert T. Hoban Jr. 56, the pilot, from Shamong, New Jersey, were killed. Benjamin McAllister and Scott Fabia survived with minor injuries.

Kearns is survived by three young children, Karter, Khloe Lynn and Kent Miller. The utility worker's loss was deeply felt in this tightly knit community and there was an outpouring of sorrow from relatives, friends and coworkers, who lined the streets with scores of their extended bucket-lift trucks in tribute.

A contractor and farmers were the first to arrive on the accident scene and they dragged the occupants from under the burning wreckage in the open farm lot. The accident occurred across the street from homes whose occupants were fortunate not to be wounded or killed. Local residents who saw the helicopter earlier thought it was flying dangerously low. It is not known if weather conditions were a factor.

It is possible that, if the transmission lines were not powered and the helicopter had only been suspended in the air, the entire crew could have been rescued.

The New York Power Authority (NYPA) said the men on board worked for Northline Utilities, a locally based contractor that inspects and maintains power lines.

Expressing the frustration of utility workers with Northline, one worker on the company's Facebook page posted, "If a lineman says NO. Sometimes you should listen."

Northline Utilities LLC Vice President, Colette Hebert, in remarks to the trade publication *US Builders Review*, underlined the extreme danger inherent in Northline's practices, stating: "There are very few companies that perform bare-hand work on 345kV lines where the linemen actually bond onto the energized lines like a bird on a wire. It is highly dangerous work and requires specialized safety, training, tools and equipment."

Transmission line inspection and maintenance is dangerous work that is traditionally carried out by workers who climb tall line towers or use a helicopter with a four-person crew. According to the Associated Press, two contractors died in January when their helicopter crashed while they were doing transmission line inspection work in northwest Ohio. A helicopter also crashed near Caledonia, Michigan in May 2015 during high-voltage line inspections, but the two crewmen escaped injury. In 2014, three men died in a helicopter crash while doing routine power line inspections in Silt, Colorado.

Northline's use of new technologies has outstripped the training capabilities of even their hiring hall at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1249 in East Syracuse, New York, which as yet does not offer certification for this type of exceedingly dangerous and questionable work, according to Northline's web site.

The helicopter crew was installing a fiber-optic cable parallel to the installed power lines to facilitate communication on the joint power line project of the New York Power Authority (NYPA) and Vermont Electric Power Company. The federal government mandates cross-state sharing of the power produced by the St. Lawrence-

FDR hydroelectric dam in Massena. The project involved replacing seven cables running a total of eight miles between Plattsburgh and Vermont that were in place since 1958, with four new ones, including a section that spans under Lake Champlain for 1.7 miles.

Andrew Boulais, a spokesperson for NYPA, indicated the time pressures to finish the project in remarks to the press earlier this year. “We were in a crunch in the cold weather to get this work done by the end of year.”

Utility workers are under particular threat due to the decaying state of America’s infrastructure and the subordination of the provision of gas, electricity, telecommunications, water and other vital necessities to profit and the further enrichment of wealthy shareholders. This has been highlighted in the lead poisoning of residents of Flint, Michigan and the recent gas explosion and fires in Merrimack Valley, Massachusetts and lockout of 1,200 National Grid workers in Boston.

In a separate accident on October 3, Brendan P. Demasters, 40, was killed by an explosion that occurred while he was 3,800 feet underground in the newly reopened Empire State zinc mine near Gouverneur, New York. Reports indicate that Demasters was clearing a blasting hole with an air tool when an explosion caused major trauma to his spine. The autopsy report said the worker died of a broken neck.

Demasters was born into a mining family and was originally from Montana. He worked in the mining industry across the US his entire working life. He leaves behind two children, 12 and 15.

The Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has been regularly inspecting the mine and filing frequent safety violations to the owners and its contractors. This includes a citation on July 26 when nine miners were injured as the mine’s elevator stopped abruptly, causing injuries ranging in severity up to broken bones.

MSHA’s October 11 release of the post-fatality inspection showed that the mine and contractors were cited for serious safety violations. Among them was the item that might have been related to the explosion: an air receiver (pressurized air tank) was found without pressure gauges or adequate emergency pressure relief valves. It is not known whether there was much reuse of equipment left in the mine from the previous owner.

The mine, formerly known as St. Lawrence Zinc, was shuttered in 2008 after a drop in metal prices resulting from the US housing market crash. It was bought by Titan Corporation of Vancouver, Canada, which restarted

operations this January with 200 workers.

The mayor of nearby Gouverneur, Ronald P. McDougall, who has for decades doubled as the regional AFL-CIO chief for the Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties Central Labor Council, said in remarks, “The mine will provide good jobs.” The mine reportedly reopened for production just a couple of days after the fatality. The miners are reportedly working 10-hour shifts.

There was a history of labor struggles at the zinc mine. In 1985, St. Joseph’s announced deep cuts to workers’ health and retirement benefits, provoking a strike by the 435 miners. The United Steelworkers union isolated the embattled workers, who stayed on the picket line for three years before being defeated.

The economic situation facing workers has always been difficult in rural St. Lawrence County. The poverty rate, which has been consistently above 20 percent, has been worsened by the recent closures of a GM plant and Alcoa aluminum smelter. NYPA owns the St. Lawrence-FDR hydroelectric plant in Massena, which grants generous utility subsidies to keep corporations rolling in profits. To increase profitability there will be 4 megawatts of cheap electricity granted to the Empire State refining mill that is on the mine site. In a local news report, Keith Boyle, Titan’s chief operating officer said of the NYPA, “They were a catalyst in helping restart the operation with the low-cost power that will be provided.”

The newly formed Titan boasts of a seasoned management team, which includes former New York Governor George Pataki, who is also a major investor. This no doubt provides the mining company with access to different levels of government and regulatory agencies to clear any hurdles that may arise.



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