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Miner warns of safety danger at United States’ largest underground coal mine

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25 February 2019

Miners in Southwestern Pennsylvania are warning of growing safety concerns at the Consol Energy’s Pennsylvania Mining Complex as the company pushes production while cutting back on safety.

The coal mine complex which includes the Bailey, Enlow Fork and Harvey mines is running at 97 percent capacity and is expected to remain at that level for the rest of the year. The company already has contracts for 95 percent of its coal in 2019, 53 percent in 2020 and 20 percent in 2021.

Together the three coal mines make up the largest underground mine in the country, covering an area several times the size of Manhattan extending under both Greene and Washington counties. The complex is commonly referred to as the Bailey mine, as it was the first of the three mines to open.

“Everyone in the mine is very mad and concerned,” said a miner who works at the complex. “It is all production, production, production but they are creating the conditions where something can happen.”

The miner, who spoke on condition that his name not be used, noted that despite record levels of production the company has not rehired miners assigned to rock dust crews who were recently laid off and that controls imposed over purchasing are preventing miners from obtaining the supplies they need.

In an earnings call earlier this month, Consol reported its fourth-quarter and full-year 2018 results, reporting that it produced a record 27.6 short tons of coal in 2018, up 5.6 percent from the previous record of 26.1 short tons in 2017.

“Miners are really mad,” the miner explained. “Consol tells us how much they are producing but then they didn’t want to give us our bonus checks, saying

we didn’t meet ‘cost objectives.’” The company eventually paid out the checks.

“We have a new purchasing system. The upper management has to approve everything that is ordered. He is denying everything. He has cancelled orders for degreaser. Oil and grease build up on our machines, and you have to clean it off. This is a fire hazard.

“We now only have one set of rock dusters for the entire mine.” Rock dusting is the spreading of finely ground up rock to dilute highly combustible coal dust. “Rock dusting is done by a set of dusters. This is because two motors are used to haul the tanks and generally the whole operation is run by two miners.”

Fire bosses walk through the mine and identify areas that need rock dust. “There are areas which are supposed to be rock dusted the next shift. Now they are going eight, nine and even 10 shifts before the one crew can get to that area.”

Black lung is up for miners all across the Appalachian coal fields of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. The deadly disease is hitting miners at a younger age and more aggressively.

One contributor is longwall mining, which, with its greater output and cutting into rock, puts more silicon into the air. When breathed in, silicon cuts the lung tissue, forming scarring which can’t absorb oxygen.

“You can’t mine that much coal without putting a lot of dust into the air,” said the miner. The rock dust used to prevent coal dust explosions is another source of silicon. “I breath way too much rock dust,” said the miner.

The miner noted that the company recently split its mining and natural gas business and saddled the coal mines with much of the company’s debt, “All they

want is production, at all costs.”

The is very similar to the statements by then-Massey CEO Don Blankenship to miners to “run coal” and nothing else in the months before the Upper Big Branch explosion in 2010 that left 29 miners killed.

“If any of you have been asked by your group presidents, your supervisors, engineers or anyone else to do anything other than run coal (i.e., build overcasts, do construction jobs, or whatever), you need to ignore them and run coal,” Blankenship wrote in a memo to all miners at the company.

“Consol just made adjustments to the bonus systems this past week,” the miner noted. “This will make it easier for the mining crews to achieve bonuses for production. This in my view is their classic divide and conquer technique. Some miners are happy to take the money, meanwhile they continue to have substandard health insurance, no pensions, no medical retiree benefits, etc.”

Last November marked the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Farmington Mine disaster in north central West Virginia, in which 78 coal miners were killed from a methane explosion. In the weeks and days before that disaster, miners told their wives and family that they feared for safety in the mine because of the increase methane levels in the mine.

Following that disaster, an upsurge in struggle by miners and other workers throughout the country forced the passage of mine safety laws that greatly reduced miners’ deaths and improved health.

No sooner were these safety measures enacted, coal lobbyists and politicians, both Democrats and Republican, began working to undermine them. Most notably, the Clinton administration rejected lower dust levels and other safety procedures which if enacted would have prevented the Upper Big Branch disasters as well as the upsurge in black lung.

The Trump administration in its bid to boost corporate profits at the expense of workers have cut regulations and staffed the Mine Safety and Health Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency leadership with former energy lobbyist and company executives.

Consol executives know that they are not going to face very many safety violation citations and fines and the few they get will be reduced, considered a part of the cost of doing business.

The Bailey mine is the last remaining large mine in Greene County, an area where there used to be a dozen large mines. Last year the 4 West mine near Mt. Morris was closed, and the Emerald mine just outside of Waynesburg was closed in 2015. Together about 1,000 miners lost their jobs.

While some miners working in Bailey complex may have hoped that the United Mine Workers (UMW) would organize the complex and set safety and production standards, in fact the union has been a partner with Consol in attacking miners’ rights.

When Bailey began operating in 1984 it was the first non-union mine to open in the region. The UMW struck a deal with Consol, allowing the mine to be non-union on the condition that three out of five people the company hired were laid off miners from Consol’s other mines. While the union sold this to its members as a way to secure jobs for laid off miners, in reality this ensured that the company could shut down its other mining operations in an orderly fashion.

The Socialist Equality Party calls upon miners to form rank-and-file committee that will set both production and safety levels to ensure that miners can work in a safe environment without risk to themselves or their families.



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