

Twenty-five-year-old miner crushed to death in Pennsylvania coal mine

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2 September 2019

Tanner Lee McFarland was killed Thursday evening when part of the wall and roof in the area of the mine he was working collapsed, crushing him under tons of coal and rock.

McFarland, age 25, of Washington, Pennsylvania was killed around 6 p.m. Thursday while working at Consol Energy's Enlow Fork Mine in Washington County, part of the company's Pennsylvania Mining Complex. The mines are located about 60 miles south of Pittsburgh, near the West Virginia border.

McFarland is survived by his wife Casey and their two-year-old son Gavin Lee. Tanner and Casey began dating in 2012 and were married in 2015. Casey is expecting their second child.

Tanner was well liked by his co-workers and friends. A GoFundMe page has already raised over its goal of \$25,000, which included support from miners throughout the country who didn't know him.

Dennis Letavish, who worked with McFarland, posted this remembrance on Facebook:

"It's been 2 days. 2 restless nights. Nonstop thoughts and emotions. You were more than our boss you were our friend our brother. It all still doesn't feel real I'm just waiting to wake up from this nightmare we are living. Tanner McFarland we will never forget the memories we made and your inability to use a tape measure. You impacted us all each in different ways and we love you and will never forget you brother ..."

Enlow Fork is one of three mines in Consol's Pennsylvania Mining Complex, which also includes the Bailey and Harvey mines, and is commonly referred to as the Bailey mine because it was the first of the three. The complex is several times the size of Manhattan, covers coal reserves underneath portions of Washington and Greene counties, and is the largest underground mine in the US.

Fifteen hundred miners and contractors work in the mine. Consol operates 11 long walls in the three mines and production is the company's number one concern. Long wall mining is a technique in which a massive mining machine mines coal along the entire face of the section, often 1,500 feet long, with the coal pulled off on conveyor systems while the mountain collapses behind it as the machine moves forward.

In February of this year, the WSWs interviewed a miner who was especially concerned about the push for production in the mine at the expense of miners' health and safety. (See: Miner warns of safety danger at United States' largest underground coal mine)

The miner explained that Consol was only looking to increase production and didn't care about maintenance of the machines or the safety of the men.

"Everyone in the mine is very mad and concerned," he said. "It is all production, production, production but they are creating the conditions where something can happen."

In 2018, the three mines produced a record 27.6 short tons of coal, up 5.6 percent from the previous record of 26.1 short tons in 2017. The Enlow Fork Mine produced over 10 million short tons that year. Consol's aim has been to produce more this year and the mine has been working at near 100 percent capacity.

After that production report, Consol management told miners that if they talked to the press it would only lead to safety investigators entering the mine and possibly shutting down sections. The unspoken threat was that workers would lose their jobs.

The miner reported that the company was not rock dusting as soon as it was supposed to. Rock dusting is a technique used to prevent the buildup of coal dust, which is explosive. He also indicated that Consol was falsifying dust samplings that the company turned into

state and federal regulators.

“You can’t mine that much coal without putting a lot of dust into the air,” the miner said.

Black lung disease has gone up for miners all across the Appalachian coalfields of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. The deadly condition is hitting miners at a younger age and more aggressively and is the number one killer of coal miners.

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. This hastens black lung and makes it more aggressive and lethal.

Demand for coal is down as electric power plants switch to less expensive natural gas for fuel. So far this year several coal companies have declared bankruptcy, including Blackjewel, the nation’s sixth largest producer of coal, and Cloud PeakEnergy, the third largest producer.

Seventeen-hundred miners were put out of work when Blackjewel went bankrupt and another 1,200 miners jobs are threatened as Cloud Peak goes through bankruptcy.

Blackjewel miners in Cumberland Kentucky, continue to occupy railroad tracks leading from one of the company's mines to demand that Blackjewel pay them the more than three weeks in back pay owed them when the company filed for bankruptcy.

Mines such as Consol are seeking to push production and cut costs to make as much profit as possible, no matter the toll on workers and their families.



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