

Miners with black lung face COVID-19 danger as US mines continue operations

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The US states of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Alabama and Kentucky have all allowed underground coal mining to continue in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic despite the fact that infection by the disease would mean almost certain death for any of the thousands of coal miners and retirees already suffering from black lung.

Coal workers' pneumoconiosis, more commonly called black lung, is a life-threatening and very painful illness caused when coal dust scars and blocks lung tissue, making it harder and harder for a miner to take in oxygen.

Miners and health care workers are concerned over the impact that a major lung infection such as caused by COVID-19 would have on people already suffering from a serious lung disease.

COVID-19 "would be a nail in the coffin," said Teresa Tyson, president and CEO of The Health Wagon, which operates free clinics in Wise, Virginia and surrounding counties, speaking to the HuffPost about her father, a former miner who has black lung.

"We are seriously worried about our population out here," Tyson continued. She said her staff has spent weeks preparing for COVID-19, making sure patients had three months' supply of medicine.

Black lung clinics throughout the region have shut down during the pandemic. Many health care workers were needed to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, and medical officials at the centers did not want to take the chance of a black lung client coming into contact with a COVID-19 patient and becoming infected.

Rural Americans have also seen a loss of health care as hospitals in rural areas are closed down in record numbers. Last year 19 hospitals closed, and there have already been eight closures so far this year, despite the global pandemic.

There are no official statistics on the number of COVID-19 cases among coal miners. The Appalachian coal-producing region is still relatively free of the coronavirus compared to major population centers such as New York, Philadelphia and Detroit, where government inaction has allowed the pandemic to take hold with deadly consequences.

Yet many of the counties in this region have cases numbering in the hundreds, some in the thousands, posing a deadly threat to coal miners.

Two western Pennsylvania miners tested positive for coronavirus, forcing Consol Energy to close the Bailey mine while they disinfected machinery and work areas. The mine has since reopened.

"To their credit they've taken some steps," said a miner who works at the mine. "They have staggered the crews going into the mine, so instead of having 30 guys in an elevator, there are 10.

"Of course, if one of those guys is sick the other nine are going to get it. And science says that the virus lives on surfaces for up to three days. I don't think they are disinfecting the elevator between each crew."

The miner, who asked that his name not be used for fear of retaliation from the company, pointed out that there are many joint areas that the miners use, and that even cleaning them once a day will leave a lot of miners exposed.

"We are all climbing in and out of the same crew cars, using the same bath house. If a miner gets it, it is going to spread," said the miner. "The bottom line is the company cares about profits and not miners."

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), approximately 20 percent of underground coal miners and 10 percent of surface miners have or will develop black lung.

In reality the number is much higher. A 2016

National Public Radio investigation of data from 11 black lung clinics in Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio found 962 cases of the most severe form of black lung, known as Progressive Massive Fibrosis (PMF), in the previous five years, or ten times the 99 cases identified by the government.

Most miners receive no benefits for black lung. To receive benefits, a miner must have worked for 15 years in the mines and be 100 percent disabled. This places many miners, when they begin to develop black lung, in a Catch-22 situation; either quit working but have no income for themselves and their family, or keep working until they are at death's door.

After decades of a steady decline in the number of cases, black lung among miners began to rise again in the 1990s. Government officials have never bothered to find out why, but miners have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the reason is the growth of long wall mining, which releases huge quantities of coal dust into the air.

Most disturbing is that new cases of black lung are affecting miners at a younger age, and it often comes with fibrosis, another lung disease caused by breathing in rock dust. Fibrosis is more aggressive and deadly than black lung.

The giant long wall machines cut both the coal and rock in their path, creating vast amounts of rock dust along with the coal dust. This problem has also gotten worse as coal companies continue operations in narrower and narrower coal seams to extract the most coal possible, but also running through much more rock.

Last month, coal operators sought to cut the excise tax used to fund black lung benefits by 50 percent. Currently coal operators pay just \$1.10 per ton of underground coal mined and \$.55 per ton for surface mining. They lobbied for the cut as part of the government's \$2.2 trillion bailout of Wall Street.

The cut was not included, but the fund for black lung benefits faces bankruptcy anyway, as coal operators have gone bankrupt in record numbers over the past five years. Funds for the benefits are expected to run out in 2022, but it may turn out to be even sooner, as more coal operators file for bankruptcy.

Senator Joe Manchin, Democrat from West Virginia, and Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky refused to include funding for

black lung benefits in a bill passed last year, which transferred \$750 million a year from the fund used to clean up pollution at abandoned mines to the United Mine Workers Health and Pension fund.

While confronting the fear of COVID-19 infection, coal miners are also facing the threat of layoffs, as demand for coal plummets. There has been a long-term decline in coal usage as power companies shift away from burning coal to the less expensive natural gas. At the same time, demand for both electrical power and the highly profitable metallurgical coal has fallen off the cliff in the last six weeks, as the economy shuts down due to the coronavirus.



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