

Two dead in separate accidents in West Virginia coal mines

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3 June 2021

Twenty-six-year-old Trenten Dille, a miner and father of two from Littleton, West Virginia, died early Wednesday morning after being crushed by the rib of a support pillar in a Marion County Coal Resources mine. Barely 24 hours later, a second death was reported at Horse Creek Eagle Mine, operated by Alpha Metallurgical Resources in southern West Virginia. According to a news release late Thursday night, Nicholas David Adkins, 43, died in what the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) website said was an “electrical haulage” accident at the Raleigh County mine, formerly owned by Massey Energy.

These are the third and fourth coal mining deaths this year; West Virginia now accounts for three of those deaths.

West Virginia Governor and coal operator Jim Justice issued his usual hypocritical call for prayers for Dille’s family, as did Senator Joe Manchin. National Public Radio once gave Justice the title of “top mine safety delinquent” because of the numerous safety violations in the mines he owns. Manchin, a top Senate backer of the coal industry, refused to add funding to black lung surveillance and treatment programs to a 2019 bill that stripped funds from environmental rehabilitation of mines. Since 2012, black lung rates have soared to heights unseen since the early 1970s.

Marion County has seen some of the nation’s most devastating mining disasters. In 1907, an explosion in a network of mines in Monongah killed 361 miners. In November 1968, an explosion at the Consol Number Nine mine in Farmington claimed the lives of 78. The resulting fire burned for over a week, contained only after the mine was sealed with concrete.

In response, 40,000 coal miners throughout West Virginia staged wildcat strikes demanding safer working conditions and better health benefits. The widows of Farmington’s victims testified before Congress about the

hazards their husbands had faced in the mines. Congress passed the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety act of 1969, which created more stringent oversight for the nation’s mines.

For decades after the Farmington explosion, working conditions improved for US coal miners. Black lung rates began to plummet. Deaths attributable to mining decreased. But over the course of the 21st century, those important gains have been reversed.

In September 2001, 13 miners at Jim Walter Resources Number Five Mine in Brookwood, Alabama died when thick coal dust ignited methane in the mine. Today, the Number Five Mine is Warrior Met Coal Prep Plant Number Five, one of the sites being picketed by 1,100 Warrior Met strikers. The 2001 explosion is never far from the minds of the striking workers; while their primary complaints are over their pay and their health benefits, they are also concerned about their safety in a gassy mine run by Wall Street hedge fund managers.

In January 2006, an explosion at the Sago Mine in West Virginia led to a collapse that trapped 13 miners within the mine. A single miner survived with life-threatening injuries. The Sago Disaster was the worst mining disaster in West Virginia since Farmington. In 2010, it was surpassed by the Upper Big Branch explosion that killed 29 miners in Montcoal.

Incidence of coal worker’s pneumoconiosis, or black lung, decreased dramatically between 1970 and the early 1990s. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of cases increased by 900 percent. By 2016, rates of black lung among coal miners in West Virginia and Kentucky were the highest they had been since 1970, when record-keeping for the disease first began.

Throughout the Appalachian coal fields, operators play a shell game, shifting ownership of the mines and changing the names of companies in order to wash their hands of employee pensions and health benefits. The coal

industry curried the favor of the George W. Bush administration, which in turn relaxed regulations throughout the early years of his presidency. Miners in Brookwood recount how mine management was alerted ahead of the arrival of inspectors, and how they were punished for speaking out about hazards in the mine.

A significant portion of the blame also belongs to the United Mine Workers of America, largely a bureaucratic shell after collaborating with management to carry out mine closures and layoffs for decades. Significantly, as of Thursday evening, there has been no mention of the deaths of Trenten Dille or Nicholas Adkins on the UMWA's social media accounts or its website, although the UMWA is reportedly in both mines.

The selective strike policies of UMWA President Richard Trumka in the 1980s led to the strangulation of one strike after another, including at A.T. Massey and Pittston. West Virginia, once a UMWA stronghold, now has fewer unionized mines than right-to-work Alabama.

Trumka's protege, UMWA President Cecil Roberts, is strangling the Warrior Met strike in the same way. Warrior Met Coal's workers are expected to work at least six days a week, 12 and 14 hours a day, and to volunteer periodically for a seventh day. This is part of the contract that Cecil Roberts and his flunkies forced upon Warrior Met Coal's miners in 2016; the tentative agreement the union reached with the company in April did not change that. These hours would be brutal for any worker; for miners in North America's deepest and gassiest mine, they are potentially deadly.

Miners worldwide face unacceptable hazards. These dangers will worsen as the crisis of capitalism escalates. The UMWA's treachery underscores the futility of appealing to the trade unions for help.

Miners throughout the United States must reject the betrayals of the UMWA and form their own rank-and-file committees. They must expand the strike at Warrior Met Coal across the globe and advance demands for safer working conditions and better medical coverage.



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