

Two US miners killed in first week of 2022

Samuel Davidson
12 January 2022

A limestone quarry miner in Pennsylvania and a coal miner in Indiana were killed in two separate accidents in the opening week of the new year.

On January 7, a Fayette County, Pennsylvania, miner, 49-year-old David Hayden, was killed when around 3 p.m. the roof collapsed on him and the loader he was running. It took rescue crews nearly eight hours to clear away the fallen boulders and remove David's body from the loader. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Later that evening, 35-year-old Brian Rodriguez was killed at the Oaktown Mine in Knox County, Indiana. The Federal Mine Safety Health Administration, which is investigating the death, has not released details, but is classifying the accident as being caused by machinery. This a wide category, but often refers to a miner being crushed or pinned by some of the mining machines.

Rodriguez had worked as a coal miner for over nine years. He is survived by his wife and seven children.

David Hayden left behind his wife Sydney and four children and one grandchild. He was a devoted father according to his daughter Davina Hayden who organized a go fundme page to support his wife and the younger children.

Davina told the *Observer-Reporter* that David "was an amazing person with a huge heart and such a big personality. He lived for his family and would do anything for them."

David followed his father who also worked in the region's mines according to Davina.

"You can't always see everything going on around you when you're operating a loader," said a former coal miner who did not work at the mine. "It's safer if you have others in the area who might see something you miss.

"Had he moved into an area where the roof wasn't bolted? Or maybe the bolts start coming loose, I don't know. I don't know for sure that they bolt a quarry mine, but they must have some kind of roof support and

clearly that wasn't right.

"In this day and age miners should not be dying."

According to the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), 37 miners were killed last year and 29 miners in 2020. MSHA is not releasing any details of the two accidents and will not issue a final report for months. At most the companies may face small fines, which they will undoubtedly appeal and likely get reduced.

The mines where David Hayden and Brian Rodriguez worked were relatively small. David worked for Arcosa Inc. and Brian worked for the Hallador Energy Company.

For decades mine operators have learned to use a series of contractors and intermediate companies to shield themselves from safety and environmental responsibility.

Coal production is up after hitting a 50 year low in 2020, a year in which over 150 mines were closed. In 2021, production began to rebound, driven mainly by a strong demand for coal by China.

Higher natural gas prices are also causing some electric producers to increase the amount of coal they are using in generation. The US Energy Information Administration expects that when the final numbers are in, they will show a 22 percent growth in electricity generation from coal in 2021 compared to 2020.

However, the recovery in coal production has not led to a corresponding increase in jobs for coal miners. After production fell more than 40 percent from its peak of 1,172 million short tons in 2008, tens of thousands of miners have lost their jobs.

To meet increased demand, mine companies have not hired back miners, but have instead relied on speedup, longer hours and forced overtime to boost production.

In the face of demands for increased production with fewer workers, safety protections for miners have eroded. In addition to accidents, miners face the

upsurge in black lung disease and silicosis. Both are irreversible and fatal lung diseases caused by breathing in the vast amounts of coal and rock dust kicked into the air during mining.

MSHA does not even keep records, but each year thousands of current and former miners die from black lung. Many are forced to keep working with black lung because they are denied benefits, forced to choose between providing for their families and their health.

“When you have to feed your family, you do what you have to do,” said Bill, a retired worker who lives in nearby Uniontown, Pennsylvania. “The union no longer exists. There are so many people out of work, and the jobs that are around here don’t pay anything, the companies have the upper hand.”

Fayette County is one of the poorest counties in Pennsylvania. Over 18 percent of the population is listed as living in poverty and household income is about a third less than the rest of the state.

Similarly, in Knox County, Indiana, nearly one in seven live in poverty and the average household income is only about 70 percent of the state average.

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which once represented a powerful force to protect miners’ safety, no longer exists in these regions and where it does it represents the interests of the operators.

The UMWA has fewer than 9,000 active members, most scattered in smaller mines. Over 1,100 miners at the Warrior Met Mine in Alabama, formerly the Jim Walter mine, have been on strike since April 1. Miners there worked five years under a concessions contract and they overwhelmingly voted down another concessions contract pushed by the UMWA.

Since then, the UMWA has systemically isolated the workers and allowed Warrior Met to resume production with management and scabs. The UMWA is working to break the strike as a warning to other workers not to take action against the coal operators.

Miners must heed the lessons of the past decades and follow the example of autoworkers, teachers, Amazon workers and health care workers by forming a rank-and-file committee, independent of the UMWA and democratically controlled by the members. These committees would discuss and implement measures to ensure that workers safety comes before the profits of the mine operators.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact