

3 miners killed in the US over 3 days

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Miners: tell us what conditions are like at your mine. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Three miners were killed in three separate accidents over three days in May. The deaths took place in three different states, in three different types of operations, under three different sets of circumstances. Together they expose a single reality: The mining companies, the federal and state regulators, and the union apparatus are all part of the same machinery that treats miners' lives as a cost of production.

May 19: Zachary Wolfe, 34, of Rices Landing, Pennsylvania, was killed at the Bailey Mine in Greene County. Mine Safety and Health Administration's (MSHA) preliminary report states that Wolfe and two other miners were struck by a section of rib, the sidewall of an underground mine passage. Local reports said Wolfe was working roughly 700 feet underground, installing roof supports, when a massive section of rock and coal broke loose and crushed him.

May 20: Preston B. Pollard, 25, a contractor and field mechanic from Kentucky, was killed at the Combs Branch job site in Perry County, Kentucky. Pollard was removing the counterweight from a Caterpillar 992G front-end loader when it fell on him.

May 21: Robert Ozuna, 57, of Henderson, Nevada, was killed at the Lone Mountain Pit in Las Vegas. MSHA classified the death as an exploding-vessel-under-pressure accident. The Clark County coroner attributed Ozuna's death to multiple blast injuries.

These deaths come amid a series of global industrial disasters. The same week the three miners were killed, a 900,000-gallon chemical tank ruptured at the Nippon Dynawave Packaging paper mill in Longview, Washington, killing 11 workers. The tank held white liquor, a highly caustic solution of sodium hydroxide and sodium sulfide used in pulp processing.

In China, a gas explosion at the Liushenyu coal mine in Shanxi province killed at least 82 workers, the deadliest Chinese mining disaster since 2009. The mine had been cited in 2024 for "severe safety hazards," including high gas levels that made it prone to explosions.

Whether in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Nevada, Washington or Shanxi, the same forces are at work. The corporations push production and cut costs. The regulators issue citations that amount to nothing. The politicians of both parties make promises and hold hearings and nothing changes. The union apparatuses—the United Mine Workers, the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, the state-run unions in China—function to suppress workers' opposition on behalf of the corporations and the government.

The Bailey Mine: a history of deadly cost-cutting

The Bailey Mine is part of the Pennsylvania Mining Complex, the largest underground coal mine in the United States. The complex includes the Bailey, Enlow Fork and Harvey mines, covering an area several times the size of Manhattan underneath Greene and Washington counties in

Southwestern Pennsylvania. Formerly operated by CONSOL Energy, the complex is now controlled by Core Natural Resources following CONSOL's merger in 2025 with Arch Resources.

Core's own 2025 mine-safety disclosure, filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), shows that the Pennsylvania Mining Complex received 62 significant-and-substantial MSHA citations across the three mines last year. Bailey alone accounted for 42 of those citations and \$218,061 in proposed MSHA assessments.

\$218,000 is just a drop in the bucket when compared to the revenue made at the mine. But even this tiny fraction is more than the company is prepared to pay. They have appealed the citations and will no doubt get them reduced.

Bailey Mine produced 10.8 million tons of coal in 2024, worth an estimated \$708 million at Core's reported average Pennsylvania Mining Operations revenue of \$65.54 per ton. At that rate, the mine produced coal equal to its entire 2025 proposed MSHA penalties of \$218,061 in less than three hours.

By contrast, Core's 2025 proxy statement reported that James Brock, then CONSOL's chief executive, received total 2024 compensation of \$13.09 million. Mitesh Thakkar, president and chief financial officer, received \$4.27 million.

Miners at the complex have been warning for years about the conditions underground.

In February 2019, the WSWs interviewed a miner at the complex who described what was happening as the company pushed production to record levels. "Everyone in the mine is very mad and concerned," the miner said. "It is all production, production, production, but they are creating the conditions where something can happen."

At the time, he explained that despite record output, the company had not rehired laid-off miners assigned to rock dust crews. Rock dusting is the spreading of finely ground rock to dilute highly combustible coal dust and prevent explosions. "There are areas which are supposed to be rock dusted the next shift," he said. "Now they are going eight, nine and even 10 shifts before the one crew can get to that area."

"You can't mine that much coal without putting a lot of dust into the air," the miner said. He also indicated that the company was falsifying dust samplings submitted to state and federal regulators.

Seven months after that interview, 25-year-old Tanner Lee McFarland was crushed to death at the Enlow Fork Mine when part of the wall and roof in the section where he was working collapsed under tons of coal and rock. McFarland left behind his wife Casey, their two-year-old son Gavin Lee and a second child on the way.

"This was preventable," one miner told the WSWs at McFarland's viewing. "They knew the rib was giving way." The accident occurred in an underground tunnel that connected to the longwall face—the only way to get to or from the face. Everyone knew the wall was weak. The bolts drilled into the wall for support had started to give way.

Other deaths have occurred in this mine. In 2000, Jeffrey Cunko, a 50-year-old maintenance foreman, was killed at Bailey when a torque arm on a hydraulic conveyor drive broke loose and struck him. In 2009, Robert Maust, 54, was killed at Bailey after being struck by falling rock. Now

Wolfe's death adds another name to this record.

The role of the UMWA

The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) does not play any significant role in the lives of miners at the complex. Decades of betrayals of miners' struggles and collusion with the coal operators have reduced the union to insignificance.

The Bailey Mine itself was the first nonunion mine to open in the region. When it began operating in 1984, the UMWA struck a deal with CONSOL, allowing the mine to be nonunion on the condition that three out of five workers hired were laid-off miners from CONSOL's other union operations.

The union sold this to its members as a way to secure jobs. In reality, it ensured that the company could shut down its union mines in an orderly fashion while opening a nonunion operation where it could impose whatever conditions it wanted.

Black lung making a comeback

The toll of mining extends far beyond the sudden accidents that make the news. Black lung disease, a preventable and fatal occupational illness caused by inhaling coal mine dust, is the number one killer of coal miners. After declining for decades, it has made a vicious comeback. In 2018, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reported that in Central Appalachia, as many as one in five long-tenured underground coal miners had evidence of black lung—the highest level recorded in 25 years. The disease is afflicting miners at a younger age and more aggressively than before.

One contributor is longwall mining itself. The technique, in which a massive machine mines coal along a face often 1,500 feet long while the mountain collapses behind it, generates enormous volumes of dust. The greater output and the cutting into rock puts more silica into the air. When inhaled, silica particles cut the lung tissue, causing scarring.

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

Systematic deregulation

Under the mine-safety system, MSHA issues citations and proposes penalties, but operators can contest both before the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission. Core's own SEC filing states that violations and penalties can be contested and appealed, and that in that process they are "often reduced in severity and amount" or dismissed. At the end of 2025, Bailey, Enlow Fork and Harvey together had 12 pending legal actions involving penalty contests and related appeals.

The system has been further weakened by the Trump administration. Trump's January 2025 executive order directed federal agencies to identify 10 regulations to be repealed for every new one issued. The administration and DOGE targeted MSHA field offices for lease cancellations, threatening the local enforcement presence that inspectors

rely on to reach mines and carry out required inspections.

Trump appointed Wayne Palmer, a mining industry association executive, to head MSHA, and David Keeling, a former safety executive at Amazon and UPS, to head OSHA. OSHA is being cut by 8 percent and losing more than 12 percent of its staff—reductions that mean each American workplace can expect a safety inspection once every 266 years.

Most devastating was the attack on NIOSH, the research and medical-surveillance agency that monitors black lung disease and conducts workplace-health research. The administration terminated hundreds of NIOSH employees, disrupting black-lung screening and other worker-health programs before some were reinstated after legal and public pressure.

But the hollowing out of mine safety did not begin with Trump. MSHA and OSHA have been underfunded and understaffed for decades under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. The number of coal mine inspectors has been steadily reduced. The fines imposed for safety violations have been among the lowest of any federal regulatory agency. Since 1999, MSHA has collected only a fraction of the penalties it has levied. The coal operators treat fines as a cost of doing business.

This process has been carried out under both parties. Bailey Mine is located in Democratic-controlled Pennsylvania. Under the Clinton administration, proposed regulations to lower coal dust levels and require additional oxygen respirators were studied but never enacted. Under Obama, MSHA staffing continued to decline.

The deaths of Zachary Wolfe, Preston Pollard and Robert Ozuna will be investigated. MSHA will issue a report in several months. A warning will go out to the industry to watch for rib falls, machinery hazards and pressure vessels. The companies may be hit with small fines, which they will appeal and likely get reduced, and then more miners will die.

To the industry and the corporate political establishment, workers' lives are worth less than the cost of bolting a wall, maintaining a tank or shutting down production to fix a known hazard.

The only answer for miners is to fight to take control of safety into their own hands. This requires building rank-and-file safety committees in every mine and every workplace, independent of the corporations and the union apparatus, with the power to halt production over unsafe conditions, investigate injuries and deaths and fight for workers' control over production itself.



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