

Two miners killed in Kentucky mine collapse

By Naomi Spencer
30 April 2010

Two miners were buried Wednesday night by a roof collapse in the western Kentucky Dotiki Mine. The mine, owned by billion-dollar coal company Alliance Resource Partners, has an extensive record of safety violations. In the past year, the mine has been cited for hundreds of “significant and substantial” violations.

The victims were identified late Thursday afternoon as 26-year-old Justin Travis and 28-year-old Michael Carter. Earlier in the day, the press reported that one of the men had been located alive but could not be rescued.

Rescue personnel were alerted that a section of the mine’s roof had collapsed around 10:40 p.m., Wednesday, April 28. The collapse buried the two workers as they manned a continuous mining machine some 500 feet underground and 4 miles from the mine’s entrance. Two other workers in the area managed to escape.

Rescue efforts were slowed by unstable conditions. According to a statement from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), rescuers began digging out debris within an hour, but had to stop early in the morning because the roof threatened a second collapse. By 8 a.m., the MSHA said rescuers were “in the area where the miners are believed to be.” According to Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear, the rescuers were “within an arm’s length” of the men when they had to stop and retreat.

The disaster comes just weeks after the April 5 Montcoal, West Virginia, mine explosion in which 29 miners were killed, and a week after the explosion on a BP-owned oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico claimed the lives of 11 workers. Another Kentucky miner, 29-year-old Travis Brock, was killed in a roof collapse earlier this year.

These and other industrial accidents in the energy sector reflect the intensifying exploitation of workers, as a consequence of both the drive for profit and the

energy policies of the Obama administration. Governmental regulators and the United Mine Workers union have enabled the mine industry to circumvent safety and health standards and drastically increase productivity on a shrinking workforce.

The Dotiki mine employs 367 workers, who are responsible for extracting an average of 25,500 tons of coal each day on two production shifts, with one shift for maintenance.

Company, political, and union officials, with the media in tow, have characterized the roof collapse as an unforeseen accident. However, the Dotiki mine has racked up thousands of safety violations in the past decade. Indeed, according to a list published last week by *Businessweek* magazine, Dotiki ranked seventh of all US mines in terms of significant and substantial violation reports from the MSHA.

Since 2005, the MSHA has issued 2,973 citations against Alliance Resource’s Dotiki operator, Webster County Coal LLC. One in three of the citations were serious and substantial. Since January 2009, Dotiki has been cited for 321 such violations, and the MSHA database lists well over 200 violations so far this year.

In addition, the Kentucky Office of Mine Safety and Licensing issued 31 orders to close parts of the mine or cease operations because of violations in the same period, in addition to 44 other safety violations.

In 2004, the mine caught fire, prompting a mass evacuation and sealing of the mine. The fire took three weeks to extinguish.

The MSHA injury and accident database offers an insight into the pervasive roof falls and frenzied pace of work in the Dotiki mine. Dozens of injuries are recorded involving flying rock in the past year. On January 28, for example, a miner working beside a bolter was struck in the back by falling debris, and had several vertebrae fractured. Roof falls were reported January 8, November 19, October 19, and June

22—many of the slabs that fell measured 30 to 60 feet long and 6 feet thick. Such incidents are commonplace, and all could have been fatal disasters.

Mine operators in Kentucky enjoy particularly loose safety laws and enforcement, often drawing millions in tax “incentives.” While paying lip service to stricter inspections in the wake of mining disasters, politicians with deep ties to the coal industry have done nothing to ensure that basic safety standards are implemented. The thousands of citations slapped on mine operators are ignored; according to a recent analysis of federal data by *USA Today*, coal companies paid just 7 percent of the fines they have been dealt by the MSHA in the last three years.

After the 2006 Sago mine and Kentucky Darby mine explosions, mine operators were legally required to implement tracking and communications systems. According to MSHA statistics, only 10 of 127 Kentucky mines under review had put such systems in place—none in the Western Coalfields Region. A mere 3 percent of eastern Kentucky mines have implemented basic communication systems.

Hours before the accident at Dotiki, Governor Steve Beshear, a Democrat, told the media that state mine inspections and rescue teams would be among services eliminated if the legislature did not agree to a budget by July 1. Beshear stressed that he had not decided whether he would have to order mines to halt operating if they were no longer inspected or covered by rescue crews.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>