

Harlan, Kentucky coal miner killed

By Naomi Spencer
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On Friday, March 25, a continuous mining machine operator was killed by a wall collapse at the Huff Creek No. 1 mine in Evarts, in Harlan County, Kentucky. It is the second coal mining fatality in Kentucky and the fourth in the US overall since January. Including metal and non-metal operations, seven miners have been killed on the job this year.

Mark Frazier, a 48-year-old miner with over 30 years' experience, was struck by falling material around 8:15 a.m., according to a state Energy and Environment Cabinet press release. Frazier, from the small community of Linefork, leaves behind a wife and five children.

The Huff Creek mine was not in production at the time, and Frazier was reportedly performing maintenance work. The mine is operated by Lone Mountain Processing, Inc., a subsidiary of Arch Coal.

Arch, which entered into bankruptcy in January, has closed down operations across the Appalachian coalfields. Alpha Natural Resources, Patriot Coal, Walter Energy, and James River Coal are also in bankruptcy.

The coal industry has shed thousands of jobs in the past few years, and shuttered most of the deeper and harder-to-mine pits in Kentucky and West Virginia. Since 2008, Eastern Kentucky coal mine employment has been cut in half. Statewide, production is at its lowest level since the early 1960s, and mine employment is now at its lowest level since the 1920s.

Counties like Harlan have been hard hit by the mass layoffs, population loss, and plummeting tax revenue. Many of the eastern counties have remained mired in double-digit rates of unemployment and extreme poverty.

State data released March 24 by the Office of Employment and Training showed unemployment rates rose in all but six of Kentucky's 114 counties over the past year, with the mountainous eastern counties faring

the worst. Magoffin County, which saw its last coal mine close, recorded an official jobless rate of 21.6 percent.

Harlan County's unemployment rate stood at 13.6 percent as of February 2016. By virtually every measure, Harlan ranks near the bottom for measures of economic and public health. Forty-three percent of children live in poverty, and the county reports a staggering child homelessness rate upwards of 26 percent. Overall, one in three Harlan County residents lives in poverty.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's annual County Health Rankings & Roadmaps report puts Harlan County at 117 of 120 for premature death rates, at 113 for health of residents, 116 for access to medical care, and at 117 for social and economic factors like high school graduation rate and injury deaths.

Harlan County has a fraction of the population and economic weight it once had, but it bears a special historic significance. The area was an epicenter of strikes and rebellions against the coal companies and the state. Perhaps more than anywhere else, the mountains of eastern Kentucky were associated with the oppressive conditions and defiant workforce of America's coal industry.

In the 1930s, the county earned the moniker of "Bloody Harlan" for the battles of miners to unionize under the United Mine Workers of America (UMW). The National Guard was mobilized to quash an offensive of miners against company thugs after four died in the 1931 Battle of Evarts. Soldiers attacked the picket lines and a union rally was tear-gassed. Communist Party youth organizer Harry Simms was killed and sympathetic miners were blacklisted.

A tug of war over unionization persisted over the decade from mine to mine. At one point, half of the mines achieved unionization, before sliding back to non-union company control. The beatings meted out to

miners by the mine guards were “the worst reign of terror in the history of the county,” Democratic Governor Ruby Laffoon commented.

In the 1970s, Harlan County erupted again in struggle. Miners at the Brookside mine fought against the Eastover Mining Company for months to unionize beginning in 1973. The company, a subsidiary of Duke Power Company, insisted on a no-strike clause in the miners’ contract that would tie their hands in opposing unsafe conditions.

Conditions in Harlan, like coalfields throughout the Appalachian region, lagged decades behind the living standards of the U.S. as a whole. Many mining families lived in former mining camp homes without utilities like running water. While Duke Power—one of the largest utility companies in the world at that time—saw its profits increase 170 percent in a single year, the pay raises of workers lagged far behind the rate of inflation. Average Eastover miners made \$25 a day, while the union average was \$45.

After voting to affiliate with the UMW, the Brookside miners and their families formed pickets at the mine. The company met their militancy with armed guards and Kentucky state police arrested those blocking scabs from entering the mine. Women and children sometimes accompanied their men in jail. After 13 months of struggle, the Brookside miners won recognition and unionized.

The militancy of the miners was to run up against the UMW bureaucracy and the Democratic Party—in coal country, the direct political agents of the mining companies. Just as Harlan miners were integrated into the union, UMW members were saddled with a new contract imposing a two-tier pension system. The decade saw waves of wildcat strikes and other actions. The conflict culminated in Democratic President Jimmy Carter ordering miners back to work under a Taft-Hartley injunction in 1978.

When the rank-and-file ignored the order and held their picket lines, the union bureaucracy compelled the workers to abandon their strike by a chokehold: the UMW withheld millions of dollars from the union strike fund. The defeat paved the way for an assault on miners and the working class as a whole.

Today, no union mines remain in Kentucky, and UMW membership has dwindled to a few thousand nationwide. By many measures, eastern Kentucky is

the scene of a social crisis paralleling areas of Eastern Europe or Africa.

The collapse in coal prices and hemorrhaging of the mining sector in the state has become the pretext for an attack on safety conditions. In early March, the Kentucky Senate passed legislation that would end mandatory safety training for mine foremen. A separate bill, crafted by the coal lobby, would end state inspections of mines. That bill, also passed by the Senate, has moved to the House Labor and Industry Committee.

Bill Bissett, president of the Kentucky Coal Association, praised the legislation as cutting red tape to help the flagging industry. “Even as we face this very significant downturn in production and employment, there’s been no contraction of regulators,” Bissett told the media. The coal lobby has called state inspections an unnecessary measure on top of federal regulations. “Our point is,” Bissett insisted, “why would the state continue this duplicative effort?”

Federal regulators are required to visit underground mines only four times a year. Presently, Kentucky state inspectors make the rounds six times annually. The state began this regimen after the Harlan County Darby Mine explosion in 2006. That disaster claimed the lives of five miners and prompted politicians and the corporate establishment to issue their ritual promises for improved safety. The reality is that the lives of miners are subordinate to profit, and the most basic safety provisions are considered an intolerable impediment to the bottom line.

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