

First US coal mine fatality of 2017

By Naomi Spencer
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A Kentucky coal miner was killed Thursday, January 26 in a Pike County mine.

Ray Hatfield Jr., 42, of Hi Hat, was working in the R&C Coal LLC Mine No. 2, a small underground mine near Pikeville when he was killed in an accident involving a conveyer belt. Hatfield was a beltman with 23 years' experience in the industry. He leaves behind a wife, two daughters, and a son.

Few details have been released about the accident, but a preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) stated that he "received fatal injuries when he became entangled in a moving belt drive roller. The victim was attempting to shovel near the belt drive when he came in contact with a tandem roller."

At the time of the accident, Hatfield was working alone; he was not discovered for several hours.

Pike County Coroner Russell Roberts said he went into the mine and pronounced Hatfield dead at 5:15 p.m. The mine has been idled while state inspectors investigate the accident.

The R&C Coal No. 2 mine employs only nine nonunion miners, according to MSHA records, and produced a mere 14,636 tons of coal in 2016. The mine is typical of the hundreds of small pits in the central Appalachian coalfields: it has been through periods of idling over the past few years as coal prices have collapsed, and it has changed hands multiple times. MSHA lists six changes of ownership since 2006, all limited liability companies. Some are affiliated with larger coal mining entities, while other operators are individuals or real estate firms.

The production level at the mine is a fraction of its activity a decade ago. In 2008, workers produced 110,276 tons of coal at the No. 2 mine and put in over 55,000 man-hours. Last year, that had dwindled to a tenth the man-hours. Nevertheless, the number of citations on the books suggests brutal working

conditions. MSHA lists 109 violations, for which 33 citations are unpaid and listed in delinquency.

Pike County was once the largest coal producer in the state, and the county seat of Pikeville was proclaimed the "energy capital of America." It has long been one of the largest banking centers in the US mid-South, with most of the holdings in local financial institutions bound up with the energy industry.

The decimation of the coal industry has intensified the long-standing economic distress of the region. Tens of thousands of coal miners and their families have been thrown into financial ruin, and many have had to leave their hometowns in search of work.

Per capita income in Pike County stands at just over \$20,000, according to the latest available data from the Census Bureau. That amounts to less than half the national median per capita income. One in four Pike County residents officially live in poverty.

Ray Hatfield's death came just one day after a truck driver at an Iowa limestone mine was killed in an apparent roof collapse.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, both accidents occur in the context of the pledges by newly inaugurated President Donald Trump to "cut regulations by 75 percent. Maybe more, but by 75 percent." One of his first acts in office was to order a freeze on new and pending regulations.

Trump campaigned in central Appalachia on the promise to "make coal great again" and re-open shuttered mines. His appointments and cabinet picks—a collection of billionaires and corporate executives hostile to safety and environmental regulation—expose the reality of his economic plans for the coal mining sector.

In the final days of the Obama administration, outgoing MSHA head Joe Main touted the record low nine coal mining deaths in 2016. "We know consistently things are getting better," Main said,

noting that for the first time, fatal accidents had dropped to the single digits. West Virginia saw four miners killed, Kentucky had two deaths, and Alabama, Illinois and Pennsylvania all recorded one death each.

“There’s a lot of ingredients that went into the recipe to make the cake that we now have in terms of having the outcomes of the safest years in mining history,” Main said. “If you start taking ingredients out of that, the cake’s not going to be as good, I can tell you that.”

In reality, the active ingredient in this death rate “recipe” is the collapse in coal mining activity, not improved safety enforcement. According to an Associate Press analysis of Energy Information Administration data, the number of employed miners in the US fell from 91,000 in 2011 to 66,000 in 2015. MSHA also recorded 16 fatalities last year in “metal/non-metal mines” like limestone and gravel pits.

At the same time that mine employment has dropped, the coal mining workforce has been diagnosed with the severest form of black lung at rates 10 times higher than what federal regulators had previously reported. The disease is caused by breathing in dust in the mines, and has been exacerbated by long shifts, increased mechanization and frenzied production rates. Thin seams like those in Appalachia where coal is harder to dig out of the hard surrounding rock produce more silica rock dust. The Obama administration introduced dust standards on these long-known problems that were far weaker than those recommended by health and safety experts.

The industry has labeled the most tepid regulations a “war on coal” and fought to roll back safety requirements introduced after disasters like the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine explosion, which claimed the lives of 29 miners in West Virginia.

Last year, the Kentucky legislature unsuccessfully considered bills to totally eliminate state inspections of coal mines, leaving the inspection rounds to a handful of MSHA employees who visit individual mines four times a year. Another bill sought to end mandatory state safety training for mine foremen, leaving the safety preparations entirely in the hands of coal companies.

As Main issued his self-congratulatory statement on record low death rates, MSHA investigators completed a review of one of 2016’s fatal coal mining accidents

in . On January 19, 2016, Kentucky miner Phillip Phillips was crushed between a continuous mining machine and the wall where he was working in Webster County, Kentucky’s massive Dotiki Mine.

Investigators found that Phillips was not wearing an emergency shutoff device called a proximity detector that was mandated by federal law, and that managers at the mine were aware of this fact. If Phillips had been wearing the proximity detector, it would have shut off the continuous miner when it drew too close to him.

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