

West Virginia coal miner killed in fall

By Naomi Spencer
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Just before 2 p.m. on March 7, a coal miner died of head injuries after falling from a highwall at a Greenbrier County, West Virginia, surface mine.

The miner, 38-year-old Adam DeBoard of Craigsville, West Virginia, was working as a loader operator at the Blue Knob Surface Mine run by South Fork Coal Co., LLC. DeBoard is the third coal miner and the fifth miner overall in the US to die on the job in 2019.

As of this writing, the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has only posted a perfunctory two-sentence notice of the incident online. The West Virginia Office for Miners' Health, Safety, and Training (OMHST) has not published any details on its website.

West Virginia's Republican governor, Jim Justice, a billionaire coal executive, issued his customary call for "everyone to join us in praying" over the loss of life. Democratic Senator Joe Manchin echoed the remarks, calling miners patriotic heroes while contrasting support for coal-mining communities with those calling for reforms based on climate science.

Coal mining has declined precipitously in the US over the past decade, due both to global economic shifts, and to increased domestic production and consumption of cheaper natural gas.

Mine employment has fallen across the US, with only about 83,000 coal miners employed today, around 11,000 of them in West Virginia. The drop in employment has resulted in fewer annual on-the-job fatalities than the coal industry has historically recorded.

Last year, 27 miners—12 in coal and 15 in metal/nonmetal mines—died on the job, including 4 coal miners in West Virginia. Overall, 18 of those deaths were at surface operations like the South Fork mine.

Nationally, federal officials are quick to point out, 2018 saw the second lowest death toll in the coal mines

on record, behind 2016, when 25 miners were killed at work—all preventable deaths.

The decline in coal mine deaths is most closely related to the decline in coal employment, not improvements in safety. Tony Oppedard, a mine safety expert in Kentucky, told *Ohio Valley ReSource* January 4 that in the Central Appalachian coalfields of West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky, "there's about one-fifth the number of mines that are operating today than were in operation six years ago."

While in straight numbers, fatalities are down, the accident *rate* continues to be high, and in some mines the dangers are increasing as operators ramp up production with fewer miners. Indeed, at the close of 2018, a cluster of three fatal accidents occurred in the span of 11 days.

Industry-wide, the accident rate appears to be rising. An *Ohio Valley ReSource* analysis found that in 2009, 18 coal miners out of 134,000 were killed on the job—a fatality rate of 13.4 per 100,000 workers. In 2018, 12 coal miners out of 80,762 were killed—making for a death rate of 14.9 per 100,000.

The West Virginia OMHST data reveals that, along with four deaths, 680 West Virginia miners were injured on the job last year. Of those non-fatal injuries, 456 were serious enough that they were "lost time accidents," meaning miners had to miss work for medical care and recovery, or were unable to return to work. So far in 2019, the state data records 107 accidents, 78 of them "lost time."

These figures do not even scratch the surface of the fatalities claimed by black lung disease, which has resurged with a vengeance in a new generation of miners in the US. A National Public Radio investigation published in December found that at least 2,000 miners in Central Appalachia were suffering from severe cases of black lung. MSHA, now headed by former coal executive David Zatezalo, has simply

stonewalled commenting on the revelations.

South Fork Coal Co., LLC is an operator of several large surface mines in West Virginia on behalf of White Forest Resources, Inc. White Forest is a new name for Xinergy Ltd., an energy company that, like many of its competitors in the coal market, declared bankruptcy in 2015 to shed liabilities and less profitable operations. It retains assets in thermal and metallurgical coal mines and prep plants in Central Appalachia. White Forest Resources is headed by Jeff Wilson, an executive who worked directly under Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship for two decades.

The South Fork operations produce mid-volatility metallurgical coal, mainly bound for coking plants that supply coke for steel and iron production. White Forest Resources owns approximately 73,000 acres of coal fields in West Virginia. The South Fork surface mine is a sprawling, 35,800-acre operation visible from space.

On its company website, White Forest boasts of “ZERO lost-time accidents” in 2017, highlighting that it was the recipient of West Virginia OMHST’s “Mountain Guardian Award” and MSHA’s “Certificate of Achievement in Safety.”

In fact, MSHA’s mine data retrieval system database records an accident in 2017, classified as “days restricted activity only,” after a rock fell from a highwall onto a loader, shattering the windshield into the face of the loader operator. Glass and debris went into the miner’s eyes, and he was transported to the hospital for care. This is the reality of a “ZERO lost-time accidents” mine.

MSHA data also lists eight safety citations for South Fork’s Blue Knob Surface Mine in the past year.

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