

Consol cuts 233 jobs as US coal production falls to 1973 levels

By Samuel Davidson
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Two hundred and thirty-three coal miners in southwestern Pennsylvania will be permanently laid off at the end of next month, joining the growing number of layoffs throughout the industry as demand for electricity and steel continue to decline.

The miners, who work at the Consol Energy Inc.'s Enlow Fork mine, had been on temporary layoff since April 15, when the company closed their mine due to the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enlow Fork is one of three mines that make up Consol's Pennsylvania Mining Complex. The company can operate as many as 11 long wall machines throughout the three mines and production is the company's number one concern. Long wall mining is a technique in which a massive machine mines coal along the entire face of the section, often 1,500 feet long, with the coal pulled off on conveyor systems while the mountain collapses behind as the machine moves forward.

Earlier this month, Consol sent WARN (Worker Adjustment and Retaining Notification) notices to the miners, who comprise about 40 percent of the workforce, informing them that they will be permanently laid off August 31. Both federal and state law requires companies with greater than 100 employees to give 60-days notice of closings or layoffs of more than 50 people.

In announcing the layoffs at the Enlow Fork mine, Consol said in a prepared statement:

"In these unprecedented times, it is extremely difficult to predict when our production at Enlow Fork Mine will return to normal capacity, as it is always our intent to run our operations based on market conditions."

"We all knew it was coming, coal is on the way out,

but it doesn't make it any easier," said the wife of a miner who has worked there for nearly 20 years.

"Things are going to be real hard. He gets unemployment and of course that \$600 [in weekly federal unemployment benefits] so we can get by." However, this temporary boost to unemployment is being allowed to expire by both Democrats and Republicans in order to force people back to work. "We own our house, but with mortgage, taxes and bills it is going to be very hard. One of our kids is grown, but the other is still in High School. We don't know if that is going to open or not.

"We don't know what is going to happen with unemployment and health care. There are no jobs. I work in the checkout line at the Giant Eagle [grocery store], but that is not very much.

"All the politicians promise a lot, but they don't keep their promises."

Consol had been operating at near capacity for the last four years producing record amounts of coal in 2017, 2018 and 2019. This is in spite of falling demand caused by power companies switching to cheaper natural gas and renewable energy sources, which had already driven less profitable coal mining operations into bankruptcy. Last year, US coal production fell to the same levels as in 1978, when coal miners battled the coal operators and government in a 110-day national strike.

Many Consol miners believed that the company was only trying to get as much money out of the mine as it could before shutting it down. One coal miner at another mine at the Pennsylvania Mining Complex told the *World Socialist Web Site* last year that this speedup was creating the conditions for a major accident: "It is all production, production, production but they are creating the conditions where something can happen."

Later that year, 25-year-old Tanner Lee McFarland was killed when the wall of the mine gave out and crushed him. The company only received token fines.

This year, coal production is set for a further drastic decline. April coal production plunged 30 percent from last year to its lowest levels in nearly a half-century, 19 percent less than in April of 1973.

Murray Energy, the largest underground miner in the country, with 7,000 miners, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year. Last month the company laid off over 1,500 coal miners in the Ohio Valley region of West Virginia for one day as the workers were transferred from one company to another. With the company still in bankruptcy, more layoffs are possible.

Tennessee-based Contura Energy, which has already laid off many of its coal miners throughout West Virginia, announced plans to sell its Cumberland mine. The southwestern Pennsylvania mine employs 700 miners, whose jobs are now threatened. The company also announced that it will no longer build a \$60 million coal-refuse impoundment for the mine.

The Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana, the largest coal producing region in the United States, has also seen job cuts. Arch Coal has cut more than 560 jobs after posting a net loss of \$49.3 million for the second quarter. Production at its Black Thunder and Coal Creek mines fell to just 10.6 million tons this quarter, down from 17.1 million last year.

Coal miners responded to the downturn last year with a growing wave of resistance. Miners at several sites blockaded shipments out of the mines to demand thousands of dollars in unpaid wages. These protests began over the summer at Blackjewel's Cloverfield Mine in Harlan County, Kentucky, and quickly spread to other facilities throughout the region.

Last fall, 2,000 copper miners in the American Southwest launched a strike against mining company Asarco. The strike lasted for nine months before being betrayed by the United Steelworkers, who sent strikers back under an "unconditional offer" to the company to return to work.

The United Mine Workers (UMWA) has no policy to fight these layoffs and protect miners' jobs and wellbeing. After decades in which it has deliberately isolated and betrayed one struggle after another, the union is only a shell with fewer than 8,000 active miners, functioning only as a political prop for the

Democratic Party. The bankrupt Murray Energy is the last remaining large unionized coal company.

Salaries for top union officials, however, remain at historic highs. Union president Cecil Roberts made more than \$200,000 in 2015.

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