

Another mine death in Australia

Terry Cook
9 July 1998

In the early hours of July 6 another name was added to the long list of deaths in Australia's mining industry. Anthony Carroll, a 39-year-old mine worker, was crushed to death in a roof collapse, at the Catherine Hill Bay Wallarah mine, near Swansea, in the Northern District coal fields of New South Wales (NSW). The mine is owned by Coal Operations Australia Pty Ltd.

Carroll and two other miners, part of a crew of five, were drilling holes for roof supports, after cutting coal within 10 metres of a fault line in the coal seam. The cave-in occurred at approximately 4.45 am.

Another miner, Tony Dickson, 26, of Charlestown, was pinned by the legs under tonnes of rubble for three hours before being freed. Luckily he only suffered a fractured ankle and abrasions. A third member of the crew, a mine deputy, narrowly missed being injured only because he had stepped back to get one of the 1.5 metre bolts used to secure steel straps across the mine's roof.

The latest tragedy took place one day prior to the release of the long awaited findings of the judicial inquiry into the deaths of four miners on November 14, 1996, at the Cyprus-Oakbridge Group owned Gretley mine, at Wallsend, near Newcastle, NSW.

The four men were drowned when they cut into an abandoned mine shaft releasing a torrent of water into the shaft they were working in. The Gretley disaster was the worst in NSW in 20 years.

Numerous official inquiries into mine safety have done nothing to quell the rising tide of deaths and injuries. Their purpose has been to cover up the real source of the disasters -- the continuous downsizing and speed-up carried out to meet the demand of the mining companies for ever greater productivity.

Despite the mountain of recommendations brought down by these inquiries mine safety has continued to rapidly decline. There were over 33 mining deaths in coal and mineral mining in NSW alone in 1996-97. The

latest fatality at Wallarah brings the number of deaths in the Northern District coal mines to 20 in the last decade.

Even though the deaths in many cases were the direct result of negligence and of practices in breach of the law there have been no prosecutions of mine owners to date. However, the persistent carnage demonstrates that the cause is not rogue mine operators or isolated negligence or mistakes.

It is the outcome of a definite program ruthlessly imposed by the mine companies and supported by mining union. This program demands that mining operations be restructured in line with the drive for 'international competitiveness' and for markets. As a result anything which impedes production, including safe working conditions, comes under attack.

Commenting on the latest death one Wallarah miner said: 'I am not sure of the exact details of what happened but it can't just be written off as an accident. In principle nobody should be working under an unsound roof.'

'But the management here is no different to any other mine. There is always a pressure for increased production. We are always being told that we have to increase output or the mine will face closure. Because the roof is hard conglomerate rock and is generally sound there have been many occasions when undermanagers have told workers that they should not stop production to do roof bolting. I have known times when coal has been cut for an entire shift before roof bolts have been put in.'

'I was just reading the statement by the union's chief check inspector Jack Tapp that was in the *Newcastle Herald*. He said that the deaths in mines were unacceptable. Bob Martin, (State Labor Minister for Mineral Resources) also said something like this. But the union officials and Labor leaders never talk about the restructuring and deregulation that they have

supported over the last 10 years that has undermined safety.

'A big part of safety has always been bound-up with the amount of hours miners spend underground. But the union has allowed extended rosters and around-the-clock production. Now they have given the go-ahead for the introduction of 12-hour shifts.'

He explained that the latest death had occurred on the 'dog watch' -- the shift that goes throughout the entire night. 'At one time we would not allow coal production on this shift because it was too dangerous. Towards the end of the shift men are walking around like zombies. Production on dog watch was agreed to by the union and is now standard practice throughout the coal mining industry,' he said.

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