

Inquiry covers up causes of Australian mine disaster

Terry Cook
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Eighteen months after four mineworkers were killed at the Gretley mine, near the Australian industrial city of Newcastle, the judicial inquiry into the disaster has finally brought down its findings.

The four men, John Hunter, 36, Edward Batterham, 48, Mark Kaiser, 29, and Damon Murray, 19, were drowned on November 14, 1996, when the mining machine they were operating cut into an adjacent disused mine. A powerful inrush of water pushed their 50 tonne mine machine 17.5 metres back along the shaft.

The judicial inquiry into the disaster ran for nine months, sat for 116 days, heard testimony from 70 witnesses and received over 400 exhibits. The findings presented by Justice James Staunton to a packed Newcastle court room last week, were 750 pages long and contain 43 recommendations.

As impressive as this may sound, no one should be fooled for a moment that the inquiry or its recommendations will do anything to curb the mounting deaths and injuries in the mining industry.

Staunton said his findings showed 'widespread and serious short comings' at every level of management of the Newcastle Wallsend Coal Company -- a subsidy of US-based Oakbridge Pty Ltd.

This can only be described as a gross understatement. The inquiry revealed not merely 'short comings' but a series of decisions by management that made the disaster inevitable.

These included:

- Refusing to act on reports by a mine deputy (responsible for safety) on three separate occasions in the two weeks leading up to the disaster, drawing attention to a 'considerable amount of water' at the coal face. The last report was made on the night before the disaster.

- Not undertaking a 'risk analysis' even though the management was aware of numerous abandoned mines in the area.

- Refusing to carry out advanced drilling or to sink bores to determine the whereabouts of the deserted Young Wallsend mine.

- Not informing the miners of the deputy's reports or that they were mining towards abandoned workings. Staunton acknowledged that the miners 'plainly ought to have been told that they were mining towards an old mine filled with water.'

- Failing to check the accuracy of the maps being used by the company to determine the location of deserted mines in the area. The mine's surveyor did not investigate the position of the old mine even though some of the tracings were of maps that were decades old.

During the inquiry management admitted that if it had undertaken forward drilling or investigated the presence of water, the disaster would have been avoided. But these standard precautionary measures would have cut into production time and profits.

Despite these revelations, Staunton's only recommendation for legal action is that the evidence be referred to the Crown Solicitor to determine whether Newcastle Wallsend Coal should be prosecuted for offences under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. There was no suggestion of criminal charges for causing the deaths.

The 43 recommendations are designed to create the illusion that big improvements in safety are underway. This is why the state Mineral Resources Minister, Bob Martin, quickly pledged to implement the recommendations 'without due delay.'

A short while ago the state Labor government announced it would implement the 44 recommendations from its own inquiry into the disastrous safety conditions in the mining industry -- a report it commissioned only a few weeks prior to the Gretley disaster.

Together with other state governments, the Carr administration also claims to have acted on many of the

40 odd recommendations from the Queensland Mining Wardens Inquiry into the 1994 explosion at BHP's Moura underground mine that took the lives of 11 miners.

Yet, the deaths and injuries have continued. In 1996-97 there were 33 mining deaths nationally, including two coal miners killed in two separate incidents in 1997 in mines situated not far from Gretley.

Only last week a coal miner, Anthony Carroll, was crushed to death and his workmate injured in a roof collapse at the nearby Wallarah mine. Figures released by the Mineral Council of Australia show that on average, 27 mine workers have been killed per year since 1987.

The Carr government is deeply implicated in the unsafe conditions now rife in the mining industry in NSW because of cuts in spending to departments responsible for mine safety. Two months after the Gretley disaster mine inspectors went on strike because their numbers had been slashed by 30 percent, rendering competent mine inspections all but impossible.

The findings are also highly critical of the government's Department of Mineral Resources for issuing inaccurate maps and 'failing to investigate the position of the old mine.'

Another sure sign that things will continue as before is the response by the mining union. After maintaining a deafening silence throughout the Gretley inquiry, union president John Maitland joined hands with Martin, saying he was 'pleased' with the findings.

'Today is again another very significant day in the history of health and safety in the mining industry,' he said. Maitland was no doubt referring to the outcome of previous official inquiries that, as the record shows, changed nothing. Maitland said the union would consider criminal prosecution against the company 'as it did following Moura'.

The mining union did not pursue legal action over Moura. It abided by the Mine Wardens recommendation that no charges be brought against BHP, even though the company had knowingly sent the men underground in a highly dangerous situation.

Despite the damning evidence that has emerged, the Gretley inquiry was a damage control exercise designed to dissipate the growing anger over the increasing death toll and to ensure that the underlying causes were never probed.

This became evident in the early days of the inquiry when Staunton refused to allow discussion on a letter from a mine deputy pointing to the impact on safety of changed work practices, job cuts and speed up --

including the use of deputies in production, undermining their safety role. Staunton ruled that these crucial matters were outside the scope of the inquiry.

The mounting number of deaths in mining, and throughout industry, is not the outcome of mistaken policy, inept management or rogue employers. They are the deadly consequences of a definite program pursued by mining companies, supported by the Labor and trade union leaders, to slash labour costs and drive up production.

The result has been severe cuts to manning levels, around-the-clock production, extended shifts and the increasing use of contract workers who are often unfamiliar with local mine conditions. Three of the four killed at Gretley were contract workers from the union's own labour hire company.

There is yet another twist to the Gretley tragedy. For years the union has imposed the new work conditions, claiming that if they were not accepted the mine would close. One week before Staunton's findings were released, the Oakbridge management sacked the last 88 miners and closed the mine indefinitely.

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Another mine death in Australia

[9 July 1998]

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[18 June 1998]

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[2 May 1998]



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