

Another death in an Australian coal pit

Hundreds turn out for miner's funeral

Terry Cook
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The mining town of Cessnock in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales all but came to a standstill on Wednesday as up to 2,000 attended the funeral of Barry Edwards, who was crushed to death on July 17. The 54-year-old mineworker was operating a remote-controlled mining machine, extracting pillars of coal 45 metres below the surface of Power Coal's Awaba mine, when the roof collapsed, killing him instantly.

The auditorium of the Cessnock Rugby League's club, where the funeral service was conducted, was packed to overflowing as local people, workmates, family and friends streamed in to pay their last respects to the man affectionately known as 'Cooty.' Many more stood in silence in the corridors and outside the building.

The death of a miner is becoming such a common occurrence today that is often reported as a mere statistic, something that quickly leaves the pages of the press to make way for the next item of news. Even disasters involving multiple deaths are rapidly pushed into the background in the hope they will be quickly forgotten.

But the gathering at Cessnock demonstrates how such deaths cut into the heart of the tightly-knit mining communities, robbing families of their loved ones and often touching the lives of hundreds of people.

The Edwards family has a history in the mining industry and strong ties with Cessnock. Barry worked at Awaba Colliery for 18 years and at another mine in Cessnock before that. His two sons, Todd and Scott, followed their father into the industry and work in open cut mining further up the valley. Barry was a founding member of the rugby league supporters club in the town and had been both a player and a coach in his time.

He devoted many hours to raising money for the club and 'doing any other thing that needed to be done.' But

above all he was known for his friendly and warm nature and his quick infectious humour and quaint, if sometimes 'blue,' sayings. It was repeatedly said by those whom addressed the service that Barry Edwards never had a bad word to say about anyone.

The question, 'What type of man was he?' evoked the same response from everyone. 'Barry was a real good bloke. He was the kind of person who would give a helping hand to anyone who needed it. He has given a lot to this community and it is not going to forget him in a hurry.' A story or a personal experience normally followed. More times than not, the person relating it would fall silent, overcome with emotion and unable to continue.

But after recalling happier times and fond memories, the discussion would eventually turn to the growing number of deaths in the mining industry, revealing the deep-seated concern, frustration and anger that is just below the surface.

Barry Edwards was the second coal miner to be killed in just 10 days in the Hunter Valley. The other, Anthony Carrol, 39, a father of two, was also killed in a roof fall, at the Wallarah mine on the same Great Northern coal seam. The number of deaths in Hunter Valley coal mines since 1990 now stands at 21. There were 33 mining deaths nationally in 1996-97, an increase on the average of 27 a year since 1988.

One miner attending the service in Cessnock commented on the growing pressure exerted on mine workers to cut corners. 'Nobody chooses to work unsafely but there are many guys out of work now. With the crisis in Asia and Japan, every day you read about more jobs going and more retrenchments. You are constantly told that if the place you are working at fails, then you are out, with nowhere to go. The bottom line is that if you lose your job, there is nothing else.

When you have a family to support that is a big pressure.'

A friend agreed. 'There is no doubt that the 'restructuring' and cuts to manning levels have helped to increase the amount of accidents. But under the present conditions it is difficult to oppose them. There have been a lot of inquiries but nothing changes. Everything just remains at the level of promises--nothing really gets done.'

Following the recent deaths at Wallarah and Awaba, the state Labor government's Mining and Resources Minister, Bob Martin, ordered an audit of work practices of all nine mines operating on the northern seam. However the investigation is to be conducted by the coal companies themselves. They will report the outcome to the department's mining inspectors.

A similar direction was issued by Martin following the report of the 1996 inquiry into the state of safety in the NSW mines, an inquiry the government commissioned after 10 mining deaths over an 18-month period. At the time, Martin said only 'good luck, not good management' kept the death toll from rising higher.

That inquiry made 44 recommendations, but Martin placed their implementation in the hands of a 'high powered and committed steering committee' that included the mining companies and the trade union leaders. For well over a decade, the union leadership has collaborated with the mining companies to cut costs and drive up production, demanding that workers sacrifice their conditions to make the Australian coal operators internationally competitive.

Today miners and their families are reaping the bitter harvest of this perspective. The incident that took the life of Barry Edwards has been put down to an unavoidable accident, as if such things inevitably occur in the mining industry. The real causes are yet to be established. But even if it were simply an accident, it would be the exception, not the rule, under today's conditions.

See Also:

Inquiry covers up causes of Australian mine disaster
[16 July 1998]

Closure threatened in mining disaster town of Moura
Australian coal union imposes sweeping job cuts
[18 June 1998]



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