

Deaths in Australian mines--what produced the killing fields?

Reply to a letter from the Ulan Miners Support Group

Terry Cook, SEP candidate for Hunter
10 September 1998

Letter to the Editor,

We, the coal mining families of Australia, have had enough of the multinational corporation coal owners being allowed to have a licence to injure, maim and kill our loved ones. History proves that with the thousands of deaths in the coal industry there has never been a prosecution--no prosecutions for serious breaches of safety and no prosecutions of manslaughter for the deaths. I refer to Moura--three separate disasters with a total of 36 deaths (one an 18-year-old boy) and the recent findings of the Gretley disaster where the findings proved 43 issues of gross negligence! Still no prosecutions! I have attached a letter, which I sent to the Premier Bob Carr who I believe has referred it to the Minister of Mines Mr Bob Martin. I have lobbied other politicians and again they have referred my letters to Bob Martin.

We, the families, need your support to help assist our campaign to come to fruition, that is, for legislation for prosecutions for serious breaches of safety and gross negligence causing death. I also believe this is an issue of abuse of human rights, deaths and nothing done on the killing fields.

I have attached my letter to the Premier [appended below]. Please help the Australian families.

Yours in Justice and Accountability,

Pauline Byfield,

Lobby for Legislation for Prosecutions,

Ulan Miners Support Group President.

Dear Pauline,

Thank you for making available a copy of the letter that your organisation sent to New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr condemning the lack of legal action against the coal companies responsible for mining deaths and injuries. We intend to post it on the *World Socialist Web Site* to be read by workers nationally and internationally.

The escalating number of fatalities demonstrates all too clearly that the mining companies more and more subordinate the lives of workers to the drive for greater production and profits. Mining deaths in Australia have risen to an average of 27 per year since 1988. In 1996-97, a total of 33 miners were killed. As you are aware, thousands more mine workers are maimed and injured every year.

This is not just an Australian phenomenon, nor is it restricted to the mining industry. The same driving forces are operating in every country. In 1994, on behalf of our party I investigated the Moura mine disaster that claimed the lives of 11 miners in central Queensland. I wrote then about the wave of mine deaths around the world. Within

weeks of the Moura tragedy, 83 miners were killed in an almost identical underground gas explosion in the Philippines, 24 died in the Ukraine and 12 at Vishakapatnam in Southeast India.

I entirely agree that the coal companies have been given a 'licence to kill'. But experience in Queensland and elsewhere shows that appeals to Labor governments will not change the situation. Both Labor and Liberal governments, state and federal, share the same callous disregard for the lives of miners, consistently backing the slashing of jobs and working conditions to meet the requirements of the coal owners.

Despite endless official inquiries and mountains of recommendations, nothing has changed except for the worse. The real purpose of each government inquiry has been to carry out a whitewash, placate the anger of working people and divert the outrage into the dead-end of official channels.

Even when the inquiries were unable to carry out a cover up, and were forced to find that the employer was directly responsible, no action was taken.

This was the case in Moura. The official Mine Wardens inquiry--which included a leading mining union representative on its board--found that BHP had sent the miners underground knowing that a highly volatile and dangerous situation existed. Yet the inquiry recommended that no charges be laid. This was a green light to the mining companies to continue to kill and maim, with impunity.

Nor can workers wage a fight for safe working conditions through the trade unions. The unions have the same fundamental outlook as the employers. They agree that workers' conditions must be sacrificed in the interests of international competitiveness and profits.

In fact, the unions are directly responsible for undermining safety and for the increasingly dangerous conditions in the mines. Over the past decade in particular, union officials have overseen the destruction of over one-third of mining jobs, in order to deliver massive increases in productivity.

The unions have shackled miners behind BHP and the other national employers and played workers off against their fellow workers overseas, helping the companies establish ever more exploitative benchmarks. Cuts in manning levels, the introduction of seven-day rosters and extended shifts--these have produced the nightmare conditions in the mines that you aptly describe as the 'killing fields'.

The plight of mine workers reveals in the sharpest way that the present system, based on private ownership and profit, is completely incompatible with even the most basic requirements of health and safety for working people.

This raises before miners and the entire working class the urgent need for economic life to be reorganised on the basis of entirely different priorities--to meet the needs of the working class, not corporate profits.

The mines and major industries must be taken out of the hands of big business and placed under the democratic control of the working class so that production can be organised on the basis of safe and rational planning. This is a socialist genuine program.

In opposition to the global offensive of the transnational mining companies, miners require their own international strategy and organisation to unite in a common struggle against the capitalist profit system. For this, the working class needs to build its own mass political party.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates for both the Senate and the House of Representatives in the federal election to fight for his perspective. I am running in the seat of Hunter in the heart of the NSW northern coalfields precisely to raise these life and death issues with miners and their families.

We would appreciate any assistance that your organisation can give to this campaign, including the distribution of our election statement. I would also be happy to address any meeting of your members and supporters.

I am sending a copy of our election statement and also a copy of *Death Underground--The 1994 Moura Mine Disaster*. This pamphlet contains the results of our detailed investigation into the causes of the Moura tragedy, including the criminal responsibility of the company and the complicity of the unions.

We also urge you to visit the *World Socialist Web Site* to review the articles on mining deaths and other vital issues of concern to the working class.

Fraternally,

Terry Cook,

SEP candidate for Hunter.

See Also:

Another death in an Australian coal pit

Hundreds turn out for miner's funeral

[25 July 1998]

Inquiry covers up causes of Gretley mine disaster

[25 July 1998]

ATTN: HON. R.J. CARR

PREMIER,

NSW STATE PARLIAMENT.

17 August 1998

RE: LICENCE TO KILL

Dear Mr. Carr,

The topic, licence to kill, is an extremely important issue which I would like to highlight and put forth some of my concerns. Why is it that in the coal industry it appears and is supported, that the multi-national corporation coal owners have a licence to injure, maim and kill their workers free from prosecution? I refer to some notable disasters and fatalities being Moura, where in three separate disasters a total of 36 men were killed, which included a mere boy of 18 years, Lithgow, Hunter Valley, where in a matter of weeks there were two fatalities and recently the Gretley disaster and findings. As you would be aware that the Gretley findings proved gross negligence by the company on 43 issues.

My husband was almost killed New Years eve at the Ulan opencut mine because of what we believe was gross negligence. I can also appreciate how the coal owners care, because when my husband had

to have major surgery on his spine because of the accident, the company refused to assist us!

So I can appreciate the screams for justice for all the Australian families who have lost loved ones.

Why is it that the legislation has not brought these multi-national corporation coal owners under prosecution for manslaughter? Who is the supposed watch dog who has the right to impose fines and prosecutions? Why has this watchdog not been brought to justice as well for condoning this slaughter? There have been thousands of fatalities in the coal industry and not one prosecution.

Is the Australian worker just the so-called American term, 'Human Resources,' to do with as deemed fit, or are we human beings where a life is worth something more precious than profit? What has happened to the so-called Safety Committee that the Minister for Mines Bob Martin formed? We the families are sick and tired of these Clayton committees. Slave labour was abolished in the 1930s when women and children were sent down the mines and killed and maimed and nothing done about it. What's the difference between then and now? Our workers still go down the mines and are still being injured, maimed and killed--calling this unlimited 'Human Resources'.

Fatalities are occurring (and will no doubt continue), and there are no prosecutions. The taxpayers shed millions of dollars for reports, committees and inquiries and nothing is done and more lives still go by the graveside!

As the labourers' representative, you are in a position where you can be instrumental in the implementation and enforcement of such legislation, that being, prosecutions for serious breaches of safety and prosecution for manslaughter of those killed. Again I highlight, thousands of mine workers have been killed and not one prosecution!

I implore you to proceed with prosecutions so as to stop the coal mines licence to kill. Again I refer to the Gretley findings of 43 issues of gross negligence!

Will you support and promote our cause, that is, the fight for accountability and justice?

Will you push for the legislation of prosecutions and pursue it with a vengeance because there have been too many deaths on the killing fields?

Yours in Safety and Justice,

MS. PAULINE BYFIELD

PRESIDENT,

ULAN MINERS SUPPORT GROUP,

LOBBY FOR LEGISLATION FOR PROSECUTIONS,

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MUDGEE NSW 2850.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact