

Australia:

Two accidents highlight worsening coal mine safety

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Two incidents have again focused attention on the deadly conditions in the mining industry in New South Wales, one of Australia's largest coal producing states. Late on Tuesday evening, 50-year-old Kevin Downes was crushed when a wall collapsed at the United Collieries mine at Warkworth, near Singleton, in the Upper Hunter Valley.

Downes, who was supervising a team of miners extracting pillars of coal some 200 metres below ground, lay unconscious beneath a fallen rib for over five minutes before being freed. Paramedics worked to reinflate a collapsed lung before flying him to hospital by helicopter. The incident could have caused multiple deaths.

In May this year four miners were lucky not to have been killed in an accident at the state government-owned Wyee coal mine, north of Sydney. The four men were sent hurtling down the entrance shaft when a rope on a draft transporter snapped as they headed underground to start their shift. Three of the miners jumped clear. The fourth rode the run-away transporter 150 metres down the steep slope to the bottom. Miraculously he suffered only cuts and bruises.

Had the rope snapped on the next trip, 50 men would have been in the transporter. Tests following the accident revealed that the rope had a strength of only 12 percent of its capacity when it snapped.

The rope's faulty condition had been reported to the mine management in January. A local union check inspector had detected that it was badly frayed. The specialist firm brought in to inspect the rope advised that it should be replaced. However, nothing was done.

Arguments immediately erupted over who was to blame. The Department of Mineral Resources, which

administers mine safety regulations in NSW, claimed that it was never informed of the check inspector's advice.

Northern District secretary of the United Mineworkers Federation, Ron Land, anxious to deflect any blame from the union, said the accident was another instance where the Department of Mineral Resources had proved it was "absolutely incapable of properly administering mine safety".

Similar arguments have followed mine accidents in the past. They are designed to give the impression that poor mine safety is the responsibility of this or that individual or department rather than a state of affairs that exists throughout the entire industry.

In just over a year, three miners have been killed in mining accidents in the Hunter Valley alone. Ron Land admitted that mining conditions today were generally unsafe. He said that an Australian coal miner now has a one-in-28 chance of being killed over a 40-year period.

Following the Wyee accident, the Hunter region's daily paper—the *Newcastle Herald*—was quick to join the chorus and to advance excuses to deflect criticism from the government, the mine management and the mining union.

Its editorial comment placed all responsibility on the workers themselves. "In the mining industry every worker is responsible for his or her mate's safety," it stated. "This is commonsense and it shouldn't take volumes of legislation to ensure this happens."

The fact is that whenever workers take any form of independent action over safety, especially if it involves loss of production, they are roundly condemned in the media as irresponsible and are told to confine themselves to official channels.

Moreover, there is a widespread and worsening pattern. The most recent figures provided by the NSW Joint Coal Board in its annual report, "Lost-time Injuries and Fatalities in New South Wales Coal Mines 1997-98", show that safety is declining.

Section 2 of the report dealt with the number of lost-time injuries per million employee hours worked, known as the Lost Time Injury Frequency Rate (LTIFR). Over the last 12 months there had been an increase of 11.2 percent in underground mines and 13.5 percent in open cut mines.

Of the 80 mines in NSW, 41 had an injury rate that remained constant or showed an improvement. On the other hand, 39 showed an alarming rate of increase. The average LTIFR increase of the 13 open cut mines in this group jumped 47.1 percent, from 29 to 55, and for the 26 underground mines in the group it jumped 29.7 percent, from 55 to 78.

There had also been a significant increase in the severity of the accidents. This was revealed by the number of days an injured worker was off work—the Duration Rate (DR). The DR average over all mines climbed from 15 days per injury in 1992/93 to 23 days in 1997/98, a 25 percent increase.

The LTIFR and DR have climbed despite an industry campaign to falsify these figures. Acil Economics, in a 1997 report, revealed that it was common practice for mine management to drive seriously injured workers to work to sign-on and then return home, so that their absence was not recorded.

Since 1990, 33 miners have died in NSW, out of an average workforce of 14,687. This is a fatality rate of one in 445 workers.

After every mine disaster, the concerns of the miners have been then steered into sterile inquiries, which cover-up the underlying causes and fail to bring about any real changes.

In 1997, the Carr Labor government, faced with growing hostility in mining communities over the escalating number of deaths and injuries, commissioned Acil Economics to conduct a review of the mining industry. There had been 10 deaths in NSW coal mines over the previous 18 months.

Acil Economics produced 44 recommendations. However, it was deliberately vague. Not a single mine death or accident was concretely examined. Even though the report acknowledged that dangerous

conditions were widespread and that mine managers were involved in a "systematic cover-up of work injuries," it did not recommend that any charges be laid.

The government said it would implement the 44 recommendations plus 40 recommendations from the Queensland Mining Wardens Inquiry into the 1994 explosion at BHP's Moura underground mine that took the lives of 11 miners. Unfortunately for the government, which hoped that this would dampen down concern, another incident was to highlight the lack of mine safety.

Four miners were killed at the Gretley Colliery, near Newcastle, in November 1997.

A judicial inquiry found "widespread and serious short comings" at every level of management at Gretley. The company had failed to act on reports by a mine deputy (responsible for safety) on three separate occasions in the two weeks leading up to the disaster. It made another 43 recommendations.

Despite these inquiries and recommendations, mine safety has continued to decline. None of the recommendations have touched upon the root cause—the drive for international competitiveness and profits. It has created hothouse conditions in the mines. Workers, reminded that a loss of markets could see mines close and their jobs disappear, are driven to cut corners and take unacceptable risks in order to boost production.

These conditions could not exist without the cooperation of the union leaders, who agree with management that the future lies in defending the market share of the Australian coal producers. After every major disaster the unions are the first to call for an official inquiry. The outcome is always the same, recommendations are made and some legislation is passed, but the market prevails and workers pay the cost.



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