

Chinese miners trapped underground

Beijing exploits appalling safety record to shut mines

Terry Cook
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On January 11, a mine collapse in China's eastern Jiangsu province killed seven workers instantly. The next day 23 miners were pulled out alive from the debris but 33 remained trapped in a cavern 320 metres below ground. The cave-in at the Xuzhou Coal Mine Group-operated mine was caused by a sudden in-rush of water.

According to the last information to come out of China on January 16, rescuers had been working furiously for five days to reach the men, but were forced to abandon their attempt when the ceiling of the rescue tunnel caved in.

A mining official said he was sure that some of the trapped men remained alive because rescue teams still detected noises underground but “hope of rescuing them was dimming”. Although rescuers had been able to cut a narrow shaft through the fallen debris to push oxygen, milk and clean water through to the trapped men, it was not certain that the supplies reached them.

Media reports have described the working and safety conditions at the 42-year-old Xuzhou operation as “utterly miserable”. But the truth is that similar conditions prevail throughout China's coal mining industry, not only in small enterprises but also in the large state-owned and regulated mines.

Mining deaths are so commonplace that in the past they barely rated a mention in the country's official press. Just one day before the Xuzhou incident five coal miners died in a gas explosion in the northeastern province of Helongjiang and a similar accident in the southern province of Guizhou left five dead. One week earlier, 21 miners were killed in two separate explosions in the northeastern province of Liaoning and in the eastern province of Shandong, bringing the total

number of mining deaths since the beginning of the new year to 40, not counting those lost in the Xuzhou cave-in.

This is by no means an exceptional year. In the first nine months of 1999, a total of 3,464 coal miners perished and in 1998, 2,028 miners were killed in underground explosions and mine collapses.

In the past, the Chinese authorities, central and local, have worked to play down the extent of the carnage in the industry usually attributing deaths and accidents to the operation of “unlicensed” mines or illegal operators.

But the recent deaths, and the collapse at Xuzhou, were well reported in the government's China Coal Industry News. So too was a government announcement earlier this month that it was setting up a special bureau—the State Bureau for Supervising Coalmine Safety—“to crack down” on unsafe mining operations. Hundreds of mines, small and large, could be refused licenses and forced to close down.

The establishment of the bureau does not connote a new-found official concern over the shocking conditions facing coal miners. The change is directly bound-up with the interests of the Chinese bureaucracy and its agenda of capitalist economic restructuring.

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Reports have emerged that the government is desperate to slash coal production to end a glut, which has lost the industry hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years. In 1999 the government set a target to cut the country's annual coal output by 200 million tons and it aims to lower output by a further 870 million tons this year. China mined 1.03 billion tons in 1999,

one-third of the world's output.

Another reason for the drive to close mines is the government's decision to shut thousands of small steel smelters and mills across the country this year and slash steel production by 10 percent. More than 2,500 mills with annual capacities below 100,000 tons will be shut down. A government spokesman said authorities would cap steel output for this year below 110 million tons “to ease oversupply”.

He said the measures aimed to cope with the glut in consumer and industrial goods that have “driven down prices and profits and afflicted China's economy”. Central authorities will strictly enforce the closures by denying raw materials and electric power to targeted mills. The closed plants will be dismantled and the machinery smashed to prevent them reopening elsewhere.

The developments in China's coal and the steel industry are intrinsically bound up with the bureaucracy's drive to close down most of the country's state-owned industries and move to large-scale privately owned enterprises in which leading members of the country's ruling Communist Party will own substantial shares.

China's Minister for Labor and Security announced on January 10 that up to 12 million jobs will be destroyed in state-owned enterprises this year as the government presses ahead with its program of “economic reform”.



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