

Three miners trapped in West Australian gold mine

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Three miners have been trapped some 450 metres underground since Monday at the Bronzewing gold mine, 400 kilometres from Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Troy Terrence Woodard, 26, Timothy Lee Bell, 21, and father-of-two Shane Hamill, 45, are now feared dead. The three men, an electrician, a drill operator and a service worker, were contract employees on a fly-in-fly-out roster—working two full weeks before having a week off.

The men were trapped when 18,000 cubic metres of sand-slurry, sludge, mud and rock broke through a storage area. Rescue teams estimate that the slurry poured 200 metres down a decline ramp, taking with it huge amounts of debris and machinery.

The coarse sand and other material, commonly known as mine fill, escaped when a rock-face retaining wall gave way in a mined-out area on Level 12. It was an excavated area of the mine that had been filled from the surface with rock, cement and water to stabilise the site.

The force of the slurry swept away heavy-duty mining machinery. It is likely that the emergency radios worn by the miners to communicate were removed. Refuge chambers along the decline ramp had an independent air supply but it is not known whether the men had time to reach them. No communication has been received from the trapped men.

Eight other men who had been on the same shift were able to escape and raise the alarm. They were all only half an hour from finishing their shift when the collapse occurred.

Normandy Mining, the mine's owner, said the Level 12 retaining wall was “stock standard” and used throughout the mining industry. There had been a safety inspection of the area only one hour before. A company official insisted that the rock-face wall was

equipped with “standard monitoring devices” and that “nothing appeared abnormal at that time”.

But safety problems are known to have existed at the mine. In May 1998 a worker, Francis Thomas Grubb, 34, was killed in the mine after he was crushed against a wall by the bucket of an 11-metre loader. His mother, Colleen Grubb, called for a review of the mine's safety procedures. “Mining companies have a responsibility to ensure a safe workplace,” she said. “They are driven by the dollar as far as I'm concerned.”

Just last month a coroner's inquest into the Grubb case issued a finding of “accidental death”. Nevertheless, it noted that “mine supervisors and managers knew about breaches of basic safety procedures but did not stop them”.

The present tragedy is the worst mining disaster in Western Australia in the past decade, and the toll appears to be rising, with four deaths in two previous mining accidents in 1999 and 2000.

A 1997 investigation by the Mines Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Board (made up of mining company, union and government representatives) into mine deaths found a link to the introduction of contract mining. The investigation followed the death of two men killed by a rock fall in the Victor Long mine at Kambalda.

After surveying 1,000 employees and 150 supervisors at 25 mines, the Board's report concluded that risks were taken because of time pressure, lack of skills and incentive-based methods of payment.

The shift to contract mining, however, is just part of the wholesale restructuring of the mining industry to drive up productivity and profits. The fault lies not with contract workers but with the cost cutting measures imposed by employers and financial institutions.

According to the Construction Forestry Mining

Employees Union, some workers in the industry are now working 14-day shifts, followed by 13-day shifts, with most shifts lasting up to 12 hours. The union has not issued its own statement about the accident, however, and has not proposed any action in response to it.

The state Department of Minerals and Energy has simply issued a safety bulletin urging underground mine operators to examine their mine fill systems and possible hazards. The only action taken by Normandy Mining has been to suspend its operations at Bronzewing until the sludge is removed and the men are recovered.



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