

Deaths continue in West Australian mines

Ben Nichols
6 June 2001

On May 18, Phillip Steel, a father of four, fell 100 metres in a bulldozer to the bottom of an open pit mine, becoming the fourth mineworker to die in Western Australia so far this year. His body was found in the early hours of May 19 at Western Mining Corporation's Mount Keith nickel project in the Goldfields region.

Steel worked for Roche Mining contractors on a fly-in/fly-out basis from Perth, the state capital. Few details have been released about the circumstances of his death. The Department of Minerals and Energy (DME) has simply released a one-page preliminary report stating that a death had occurred.

The DME has sent an investigative team to the site of Steel's death, but its previous inquiries have done nothing to halt the continuing fatalities. A fourth tragedy in five months points to an ongoing decline in safety levels in the mining industry. In January, a miner was struck by lightning, on March 20 a man was killed after his vehicle rolled over, and in another case, an electrician was electrocuted.

Clive Brown, the Gallop government's State Development Minister, has announced a meeting to discuss ways to combat the incidence of mine casualties. During 1999-2000, according to official statistics, six mine workers were killed in WA's mines and 235 suffered serious injuries, including broken backs, crushed feet and fractured bones. Between 1994-1995 and 1998-1999, there were 35 deaths.

Despite this toll, DME mining safety inspections have declined in recent years, falling from 2,208 in 1997-1998 to 2,026 in 1999-2000. Moreover, the DME rarely prosecutes mining companies over deaths caused by safety breaches. Even when it does, the fines it seeks are puny compared to profits. Last week, the DME launched a prosecution against Normandy Mining, which owns the Bronzewing underground gold mine, where three contract miners—Troy Woodward, Timothy Bell and Shane Hamill—died last year when a rock

retaining wall gave way.

Normandy has been charged with workplace safety breaches under the Mines Safety and Inspection Act; the DME has chosen not to lay more serious charges of causing death by failing to comply with the employer's duty of care. As a consequence, the maximum possible fine is \$100,000, insignificant alongside Normandy's after-tax profit of \$31.9 million during the three months ending March 2001.

The DME's last prosecution was against Worsley Alumina, which was fined just \$50,000 after leaving a man paraplegic at its Collie refinery in the state's southwest.

Another government body, the Mines Occupational Health and Safety Board (MOSHAB), also professed concern over Steel's death. An official, Simon Thomson said the accident drove home the urgency of adopting a risk management program. MOSHAB has planned a three-day risk management course, to be attended by 200 mine managers.

Chaired by DME director general Lee Ranford, MOSHAB includes trade union officials as well as executives of some of the companies directly involved in the fatalities. Western Mining Corporation is represented, together with Normandy Mining and Sons of Gwalia. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union sits on the board, as does the Australian Workers Union. MOSHAB's tripartite union-management-government structure effectively incorporates the unions into the management of the mining industry.

A 1997 MOSHAB report sought to blame the increasing deaths and injuries on the introduction of contractor-based employment. Contractors now employ approximately 70 percent of underground miners and 45 percent of surface workers. The MOSHAB report drew attention to a 50 percent annual turnover rate among contract employees, a "reduced commitment" to

adequate training, and increased non-compliance with the legislation.

Outsourcing is only part of the picture, however. There is ample evidence of disregard for safety among the major companies as well as the contractors. In a recent DME-MOSHAB survey of miners and supervisors, 24 percent of mineworkers reported that supervisors ignored risk taking. Nearly half—41 percent—said supervisors did not actively discourage unsafe behaviour. Asked if management accepted unsafe practices, 18 percent agreed.

Workers said the main barriers to safe working were lack of correct tools and machinery, production pressure, poor maintenance and fatigue. Given that the survey was conducted by organisations closely identified with management, the findings are likely to underestimate the seriousness of the pressure that miners are under.

The DME and MOSHAB refer to mining deaths as “accidents” but they are clearly related to restructuring and the drive for profit. Reports released by MOSHAB and DME over the past two years show that sales are booming while employment is falling.

Western Australia's mineral and energy sector registered a sales increase of 27.7 percent in 1999-00, taking the total to \$21.3 billion. Sales growth averaged 6.4 percent a year during the 1990s. Yet in the same decade, mining industry employment fell by 10 percent.

Employers have used continuing high unemployment levels in the mining regions to erode mineworkers' conditions. Official joblessness in the Goldfields region stood at 5 percent in 1997 and rose to 6.4 percent in 1998. With youth unemployment statewide at 26.2 percent, young workers are particularly vulnerable to this pressure.

The Goldfields and other mining areas are still regarded by some as places where workers can obtain high wages and accumulate savings in short periods. The average annual wage in the Goldfields-Esperance region, however, is \$26,328, only \$6,000 higher than the state average. Moreover, average rents in Kalgoorlie, the economic centre of the Goldfields, are 72 percent above Perth's.

These figures suggest that as mining companies strive to lower costs, drive up profits and remain internationally competitive, workers are being exposed to an increasingly unsafe working environment.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact