

Over 120 lives lost in Chinese mine flood

Dragan Stankovic
16 August 2005

At least 123 miners working the Daxing Coal mine in Xingning County, in China's southern Guangdong province, are believed to have lost their lives on August 7 when a shaft suddenly flooded. The death toll could be far higher. The management has fled and there is no record of how many men were underground at the time. A former miner told *China Daily* that there were normally as many as 200. Just four workers escaped the rising waters and only one body has been recovered so far.

More than 80 of the trapped miners are migrant workers from neighbouring provinces, such as Hunan and Jiangxi. Families of the men have reportedly travelled to Xingning to wait for news of their loved ones.

The Chinese authorities have stated they cannot yet explain why the mine was inundated with between 15 and 20 million cubic metres of water. A government official told the media: "The water storage underground is almost equal to that of a medium-sized reservoir."

What is clear, however, is that workers have lost their lives due to the corruption and greed of private businessmen and local officials, and the indifference of the central government in Beijing.

The owners of Daxing are a group of local Communist Party officials, who purchased the mine last year after it was closed as part of the massive restructuring of China's state-owned industries. The mine was being operated without a production license or safety permits and in blatant defiance of a ban on all coal production in the area due to the flooding of a nearby pit on July 14 in which 16 miners lost their lives.

Despite the area being one of the largest coal-producing regions in the country, there was no mine rescue team or equipment on hand. It took more than 24 hours to ship in high-volume pumps from Jiangxi province to try and drain the mine.

Both the tragedy and the callous disregard for safety are far from isolated incidents. The day after the flooding of Daxing, a gas explosion in a coal mine in Liupanshui, in the southwest province of Guizhou, killed 14 miners. The mine was also unlicensed and operating illegally.

The safety situation in state-owned mines is little different. An inspection of 45 of the largest state-owned mines earlier this year reportedly found 3,200 possible triggers for disasters. The worst mine accident in China's recent history occurred in February, when at least 203 workers were killed by a gas explosion at a state-run mine in northeast Liaoning province.

China produces 35 percent of the world's coal but accounts for 80 percent of the world's coal mine deaths. Last year, 6,027 miners were killed in floods, explosions and fires. In the first half of this year there have been 2,672 deaths in China's mines—a rise of 3.3 percent on the same period in 2004. Mine deaths occur in China at 100 times the rate in the United States.

In the aftermath of the Daxing flood, the Beijing regime is carrying out damage control. Premier Wen Jiabao has declared that the central government will oversee an investigation. The governor of Guangdong province and senior government representatives were rushed to the mine to placate grieving families with promises of compensation and punishment of those responsible. Li Yizhong, the director of the National Bureau of Production Safety Supervision and Administration, labelled the tragedy as a "typical case caused by malignant violation of safety rules".

The major state-run newspapers and television stations have given prominent coverage to the disregard for safety in the coal mining industry. CCTV reported that "any reconnaissance of the mine would have detected a huge water reservoir" above the Daxing pit. An editorial in the *China Daily* this week denounced mine owners as not being "interested in investing in

safety equipment as this costs much more than paying off the families of the dead”.

The mayors of Xingning and the adjacent Meizhou county been removed from their posts and as many as 69 officials responsible for mine safety are reportedly being questioned. According to the *Peoples Daily*, 11 people have been arrested, including the mine’s owners, manager, board chairman and chief technician. They had all reportedly fled the scene following the flooding. All coal mines in Guangdong province have been ordered to shut down until they have passed a safety inspection.

Safety in the mines is unlikely to change in any meaningful way, however. While Beijing voices outrage when disasters take place, its primary concern is ensuring coal production keeps pace with the demands of industry for power. China depends on coal for two-thirds of its energy requirements, which have increasingly exponentially due to rapid industrialisation across the country. Coal prices have increased dramatically due to high demand.

Under conditions where easy profits can be made, businessmen and government officials are colluding to operate hundreds of illegal mines. Beijing simply turns a blind eye. When a disaster takes place, top officials, supported by the media, put on a show of concern and call for improved safety, but fail to provide the necessary resources to ensure that the existing limited regulations are enforced.

At the same time, thousands of poverty-stricken workers who take poorly-paid jobs in such operations are prevented from forming any organisation to fight for adequate safety standards and are viewed as expendable.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact