

Australia: Jubilation greets the rescue of trapped Beaconsfield miners

9 May 2006

Good news! Splendid news! Two miners, Todd Russell, 35, and Brant Webb, 37, trapped underground by a rock fall at the Beaconsfield Gold Mine Tasmania's Tamar Valley since April 25, exactly two weeks ago, have been successfully rescued.

Rescuers tunneling up towards the two broke through in the early hours of this morning. A fire engine with its siren wailing raced through the small mining town to tell its waiting inhabitants they had cause to celebrate—the protracted and dangerous rescue operation had been successful and the two men were out alive and well.

Russell and Webb had been trapped 925 metres below ground for a total of 14 grueling nights by a significant rock fall triggered by seismic activity. They only survived because they had been protected by the light steel cage of a teleloader (cherry picker). Tragically, a third miner Larry Knight, 45, was killed.

After being rescued, the two received an initial medical examination and showered in a below ground crib room. Then, in a remarkable display of dignity and courage, they insisted on walking out of the mine. After donning fluoro mining jackets and hardhats they clocked off to emerge punching the air and waving to supporters gathered in the mines compound, before embracing their waiting families.

The two men, still smiling and waving, were put in two separate ambulances and driven along streets lined by hundreds of ecstatic supporters to start the 40-minute journey to Launceston hospital. Further medical examinations found the men had not suffered any serious physical injury and were in reasonably good health considering their terrible ordeal.

The small town of Beaconsfield is again the scene of relief and euphoria, as it was on the evening of Sunday April 30 when news came through that, against all the odds, the two men had been found alive.

Soon after the men were discovered, a small hole was drilled through the rock, allowing food and water to be

passed to them and a communication line fed through. Prior to this, they had survived by licking water that had seeped into the mine from the rock face.

As before, the joy in Beaconsfield is tinged with deep sorrow over the death of Larry Knight. His funeral will be held today. Russell and Webb, despite their ordeal, have insisted on attending.

The sentiments of the residents of Beaconsfield are being echoed in the homes of hundreds of thousands of ordinary working people across the country, who have empathised with the plight of the two miners and their families. And their feelings were replicated across national borders. Messages of encouragement and support came from a number of American and German miners, who had themselves been entombed underground and understood well what their Beaconsfield brothers were going through.

It was such basic human considerations that drove the team of highly skilled rescuers. They worked unstintingly and painstakingly around the clock for two weeks, in extremely dangerous circumstances, to reach the two survivors—not for material gain but through a deeply-felt desire to help out their fellow workers.

The same applied to the proficient counsellors, who talked to the men constantly to sustain their spirits and waylay their fears, and to the skilled dietitians, who ensured the men received the correct sustenance to maintain their health. All worked above and beyond the call of duty.

Then there was the response of ABC cameraman Paul Di Benedetto. Having been woken by a phone call at midnight on the Sunday, when the men were found alive, requesting he come to the mine to assist in getting a microphone through to them to establish two-way contact, he rushed down from Hobart and got the job done.

Such admirable expressions of human and class solidarity warm the heart and lift the spirit. They stand in sharp contrast to the base sentiments constantly promoted

by the official political establishment and the capitalist media—individualism, disunity, racism, bigotry and every other kind of meanness and backwardness.

Under the current social order—where financial gain and personal wealth are ranked far higher than human life—class solidarity and genuine concern for humanity are constantly derided. Elevated instead is the maxim—“put your own interests first and the rest be damned”. At the same time, only the misfortunes of the pampered rich and famous are deemed worthy of reporting and of broad public sympathy.

The genuine compassion extended by Todd Russell’s mother Kaye to the grieving family of deceased miner Larry Knight stood in stark contrast to the hollow declarations of sympathy mouthed by the political spokesmen of big business, many of whom are directly responsible for the very policies that have undermined industrial safety over the past 20 years. On hearing the news that her own son was alive, and torn between elation and despair, she declared: “I wish I could give Larry’s wife part of my miracle.” And she meant it.

Then there is the media, swarming all over Beaconsfield since the rock fall. The well-heeled journalists and news anchors from the various television news channels and print media know or care little about the ongoing struggles of miners and their families. They only appear on the scene when tragedy strikes and a ratings war ensues. The daily images of the unseemly jostling of the media scrum and of prowling news hounds, harassing the locals for interviews no matter what the time of day, say it all.

Does any worker doubt that the media’s present “sympathy” and “concern” and its praise of working class “heroes” would rapidly evaporate if the miners dared undertake decisive industrial action against the conditions that produced the Beaconsfield disaster? You could safely bet the media would quickly spew out a stream of invective in editorials and opinion pieces accusing the miners of holding the country to ransom and of willfully, selfishly, damaging the economy.

Witnessing the response of ordinary people to the plight of the Beaconsfield miners reminded me of an article by American Trotskyist leader and lifelong socialist, James P. Cannon, written in 1951. Intimately attuned to the struggles and aspirations of the working class, in the US and internationally, Cannon never missed an opportunity to point to those examples of class solidarity and humanity that provided a glimpse of the social sentiments that would become the bedrock of a future socialist

society.

In his short, poignant article entitled “To the men who gave their skins”, Cannon commented on what he termed “the human goodness of a group of simple, unpretentious men manifested on behalf of a fellow worker who desperately needed help”. The men had donated “8 by 4 inch slabs of skin” on two occasions, to be used as grafts for a 43-year-old boilermaker who had been terribly burnt in an industrial accident.

Cannon paid tribute to the actions of the men—many of whom did not even know the burns victim—as a “representation of the deep and indestructible impulse of people, given a fair chance, to cooperate with each other and help each other unselfishly”.

Condemning the “class society of the present day” for putting “great emphasis on competition and rivalry and acquisitiveness and brutal disregard for the rights and lives of others,” he hailed the “beautiful simplicity of action” of the fourteen men who gave their skin as speaking out for “cooperation and solidarity”.

He concluded: “They are heralds of the future and represent its spirit, the spirit of socialist cooperation, whether they know it or not. They and others like them, harnessing their natural impulses to social goals, will do away with the social system which distorts and cripples human nature. They will change the world and make it fit for people and all nations to live together in peace and fraternity”.

The same can be said about the working people everywhere who expressed solidarity with, and sacrificed for, the Beaconsfield miners and their families. If their impulses are harnessed to progressive social goals and guided by a genuine socialist perspective, they will be the means of fighting for, and creating, that new and better world.



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