

# Australia: More damning facts about fatal Beaconsfield gold mine incident

Terry Cook  
17 May 2006

In the glare of the national media spotlight, Tasmania's State Premier Paul Lennon announced last week that his government would call a judicial inquiry into the fatal incident at the Beaconsfield Gold Mine in the state's Tamar Valley.

A massive rock fall on April 25 trapped miners Todd Russell and Brant Webb underground for two weeks and resulted in the death of their co-worker, Larry Knight. The judicial inquiry will run in conjunction with a coronial inquest into the causes of Knight's death.

Lennon's announcement came in the wake of a meeting of miners in Beaconsfield last Thursday, where grave concerns about safety and the mining methods used prior to the fatal rock fall were raised. The workers, under pressure to earn a living and provide for their families, voted for a union recommendation for the mine to reopen, but only "if safety could be guaranteed".

Even before the inquiries get underway, damning facts have emerged suggesting the rock fall was an accident in waiting and that powerful economic considerations drove mine owners Allstate Exploration and Beaconsfield Gold to gamble with their employees' safety.

Mine workers often say that the ground in a mine "talks" to signal impending danger. In the case of Beaconsfield it literally roared of the tragedy to come. Last October seismic activity, caused by mining, triggered a huge rock slide and around 400 tonnes of rock collapsed into a tunnel known as level 915, less than ten metres above the latest rock fall in area 925. Following the collapse, production in some areas of the mine ceased, but continued unabated in others.

During that incident there were no deaths, so it drew no media attention or public scrutiny. Consequently, the owners were able to take measures designed to quickly return the mine to full production. These included introducing a revised mining method known as checker boarding, involving the extraction of short panels before backfilling with cement rock fill.

Additional ground support was introduced in seismically-prone areas. The measures, however, failed to overcome the possibility of mining activity again triggering the same type of deadly seismic disturbance. (Miners have now confirmed that blasting, and even the careful boring that was conducted during the rescue operation, had set off earth tremors.)

Despite management admitting "uncertainty" about the "effectiveness" of the new mining methods, it reopened the closed high-grade areas for production.

The primary motivation behind the fatal decision can be judged by the fact that around \$20 million worth of gold was ripped out in the three months to March this year. At least 461,000 ounces remain to be mined. At today's gold prices, currently at a 26-year high and up 38 percent since the start of the year, the deposit is therefore worth more than \$400 million.

Mine safety in Tasmania is "self regulated". The "review" following the October rock fall was conducted by geo-technical consultants hired by the company. It is not possible to establish what priority was accorded to safety in the review, as its findings were not made public. However it is certainly fair to ask—was it a case of those who paid the piper calling the tune?

For its part, the state Labor government did nothing to ensure the mine was entirely safe. In a recent media interview, Tasmania's Mines Minister Bryan Green absolved the government of responsibility claiming that mining inspectors decided the question. Green declared: "It's not me that makes this decision...with respect to whether the mine is safe to operate."

Little wonder that miners rejected the government's suggestion that the inquiry into the April incident be conducted by the Tasmanian Workplace Standards and Inspectorate of Mines. They clearly believe that the authorities' own performance requires investigation.

Mining companies have been afforded extraordinary leeway by government regulators. One example is the astonishing information that has come to light that the shock waves from the earth tremors—caused by mining activity—that precipitated the October and April rock falls, were well within the range allowed in the mine's permit conditions.

Tasmanian government monitoring equipment near the mine recorded earth displacement from the April 25 tremor to be 4.3 mm per second. The allowable limit is 5mm per second. Last month's tremor measured 2.1 on the Richter scale, while the one in October measured 1.6.

It is now clear that the miners themselves harbored deep-going concerns about the mining methods being used and were worried about risk management in the mine. Many believed the

company was “over-mining” and that, despite the revised mining methods in the wake of the October fall, too many “crown pillars” of the hard gold-bearing quartz were being ripped out. The backfill of loose cement and rock used to replace the pillars was inadequate to support the tunnels, leaving sections of the mine highly unstable and prone to collapse.

Miners at the Beaconsfield meeting last week also complained that when they raised safety issues with management “nothing would happen”. Earlier, former mine worker and load driver Marta Pfab said that trapped miner Todd Russell had raised safety concerns with management but found it was “like talking to a brick wall”.

Despite mounting evidence that mining at Beaconsfield is perilous, and even before the inquiry brings down any findings, considerable pressure is being brought to bear for the mine’s speedy reopening.

Tasmania’s Minerals Council was invited by the government, along with the Australian Workers Union, to determine the terms of the pending judicial inquiry. Just what it will push for can be gauged by a statement last week by Minerals Council of Australia’s chief executive Mitchell Hooke. Hooke declared “there has to be a focus on the return of this mine to active, safe, operation as soon as feasible” and “unnecessary delay would be where this (the inquiry) becomes a political exercise”. In other words: any probing of the underlying economic and political considerations behind mine management’s decision to continue production after last October’s rock fall—essential to avoid further fatal outcomes—is out of the question.

The Minerals Council of Australia represents the interests of the exploration, mining and mineral processing industries. Significantly, one of the stated aims of its Tasmanian division is to work for a “*competitive economic and regulatory regime* that encourages business, innovation and investment” (our emphasis). The disastrous outcome of self regulation in mining is one of the “political” questions that Hooke does not want investigated.

Hooke’s position was reinforced by Australian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy chief executive Don Larkin who declared: “Emotional debate, finger pointing and conspiracy theories about financial intrigue do not address safety problems...”

The company also announced it will conduct its own investigation to determine whether it can reopen sections of the mine, cynically adding “only if it is safe to do so”. Mine manager Mathew Gill, who became the public spokesman for the mine owners throughout the rescue operation, said he was waiting to meet with the coroner and Workplace Standards “on exactly that process and what hurdles need to be jumped before it can re-start compared to what may be a lengthy inquiry”.

When asked by the media for a timetable for a possible reopening, Gill replied: “It’s not weeks ... months (but) not years.” Gill is the immediate past president of the Tasmanian

Minerals Council.

The national secretary of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), Bill Shorten, whose public profile has received a major boost from the various media networks during the past weeks, is also working to ensure the reopening of the mine—while avoiding any examination of his union’s role in allowing production to continue after the rock fall last October.

Shorten claims that, in the wake of the October collapse, the AWU had “sought and received assurances” about the mine’s safety following the review. “The company made undertakings that they wouldn’t send anyone back until it was perfectly safe” he recently told Channel Nine’s “Sixty Minutes”. “Clearly that commitment hasn’t been kept.”

Shorten’s position beggars belief. According to him, the only guarantee the union sought for the safety of its members was the word of the mine owners themselves!

This extraordinary statement was followed by another last week when Shorten was asked by the media if he thought the company’s directors would have consciously compromised safety? “No,” he answered, “but I’m curious to know how much the directors of the company actually know about the mining methods and how much they acquaint themselves with the safety operations and how much they acquainted themselves with the changes after October of last year.”

This position is designed to get the mine owners, directors and management off the hook—a necessary process if the mine is to reopen. How much they actually “know” about mining methods or safety operations is entirely beside the point. Shorten knows the companies and the directors have a duty of care and are responsible for what occurs in the mine.

The AWU is anxious to demonstrate its goodwill towards the Beaconsfield owners, despite the death of one of its members, and the near-death of two more. In return, it wants the company to continue to recognise the union as the labour bargaining agency with a right to a place at the table. This is in line with the practice of the entire trade union bureaucracy over the past 20 years, which has worked to subordinate the interests of workers to those of the employers in the name of making Australian-based companies “internationally competitive”. The cost has been the lives and limbs of thousands of workers, and the destruction of working conditions and living standards.

As for Shorten himself, the tragic events of the past few weeks appear to have been particularly helpful to his career. Having been propelled to national prominence, courtesy of the media, he is now being touted as the next leader of the Australian Labor Party.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**