

Polish mining disaster claims 23 lives

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In the worst mining disaster in modern Polish history, 23 miners lost their lives at Halemba, a colliery in the town of Ruda Slaska in the southern industrial province of Silesia.

A methane explosion at a depth of 1,030 meters caused the November 21 tragedy. The miners were attempting to retrieve €17 million (\$US22 million) worth of equipment from a tunnel when a blast caused the shaft to collapse. The tunnel was supposed to have been closed in March due to dangerously high methane concentrations, but was kept active because of the value of the equipment left behind.

The pit was the site of a near-fatal accident earlier this year. In February, a methane gas explosion led to one miner being trapped under rubble for 111 hours. He was eventually pulled out alive.

According to a Polish Coal Company (PCC) spokesman, the state-owned enterprise that owns the mine, the miners were killed instantly in the latest explosion. Experts asserted that the blast would have produced temperatures of up to 1,800 degrees Celsius.

Due to the depth and dangerousness of the corridor in which the miners were working, the chances of any of them surviving were seen as extremely small. This was confirmed when the body of the last of the miners was found in the early hours of November 23. The youngest of the victims was 21, the oldest, 59. Identification has proven difficult, as their personal belongings were blown away and ID tags misplaced.

Rescue teams were immediately brought to the scene of the accident, but were compelled to evacuate due to the intense heat and hazardous methane accumulation inside the mine. "Rescuers were working in extremely difficult conditions," Zygmunt Goldstein, a primary advisor to a mine rescue center based in the nearby town of Bytom, told Associated Press (AP). "We had methane, we had poisonous gases, high temperatures, high humidity, water threats, structural changes after

the explosion."

The families and loved ones of the miners were at the scene throughout the ordeal. "I came to support my mother," Mariola Pietkiewicz told AP, weeping as she explained that her brother was one of the victims. "I'm the only one left for her."

Fellow miners from the Halemba colliery were also on hand to hear the devastating news. "I have been working in the mine for 26 years," Dariusz Jozwiak told *Radio Polonia*. "I also had some close calls. But I can't talk about this disaster now. We have to go below because [we] have families to support."

Polish prime minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski flew to the area and proceeded to downplay any corporate responsibility for the disaster. "We have to bear in mind that it remains highly probable [that] the developments had been triggered by natural forces," he told *Radio Polonia*, after declaring three national days of mourning.

Labor unions criticized Kaczynski's remarks. They complained that a lack of investment and massive layoffs in recent years have resulted in falling safety standards in Poland's mines. Dominik Kolorz from the Solidarity trade union said, "For the past six or seven years we've been talking to people in the ministry of labour and they've been telling us that safety conditions in the mines are terrible.... There maybe more tragedies like this. The frequency of accidents has increased a lot."

At least 160 people have died in coal mining accidents in the past three decades in Poland's primary coal-producing region, southern industrial Silesia. More than 80 have perished in the past three years.

In 1974, 34 were killed in a coal dust explosion at the Silesia coal mine in Czechowice-Dziedzice. Five years later, another 34 perished in a coal dust explosion at the Dymitrow mine in nearby Bytom.

The rate of mining deaths began to increase in Poland

after the crisis of Stalinism in the 1980s.

A coal dust explosion at the Myslowice mine in Myslowice caused the deaths of 19 miners in 1987, while a further 19 were killed in 1990 due to a methane gas explosion at the Halemba mine, the scene of the latest tragedy. This mine was again the site of a fatal accident in 1991, when five miners were killed in a cave-in.

In 1998, six miners with damaged oxygen masks asphyxiated after being sent into a shuttered shaft in violation of security regulations at the Niwka-Modrzejow mine in the Silesian town of Sosnowiec. In 2002, ten miners perished in a coal dust explosion in the Jas-Mos mine in Jastrzebie Zdroj. On July 27, 2006, the town of Ruda Slaska again saw fatalities, with four miners killed after a cave-in at its Pokoj colliery.

Prior to 1989, miners represented a relatively privileged layer of workers during the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy, with higher wages and better social benefits than other sections of the workforce. The collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1989-90 brought with it a rapid decline in the status of Polish miners.

During and after 1989, state funding for mines was dramatically reduced in order to “open up” Poland’s economy to international investment capital, which was wary of the previous high rates of taxation to support Poland’s mines and those who worked in them. What remained of the state-owned Polish Coal Company (PCC) became a shadow of its former self, as safety regulations, wages, and jobs themselves were compromised for the sake of the profit interests of the multinational corporations and banks.

Coal production in Poland has decreased by about 50 percent since the start of the 1990s, but with current production at around 100 million metric tons a year, Poland remains the European Union’s biggest producer. Along with the cuts in production, 250,000 jobs have been axed, wages cut and working conditions drastically worsened.

On June 5, 2006 the intensified exploitation in the Polish mining industry provoked a two-hour stoppage by more than 70,000 miners. They opposed the plans of Economy Minister Pawel Poncyliusz to pay lower bonuses, even though the PCC’s profits, at approximately €250 million (\$US323.6 million) in 2005, were higher than the year before.



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