

Russia: Deadliest mining disaster in 60 years claims 107 lives

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In the deadliest mining disaster in Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, 107 miners have lost their lives in a gas explosion that ripped through a mine 60 kilometers south of the southern Siberian town of Novokuznetsk early Monday morning.

The disaster unfolded 885 feet underground in the Ulyanovskaya mine in the Kemerovo region of Russia. There were some 200 workers in the mine at the time of methane gas explosion, and only 93 have been rescued. The rest perished in what now stands, according to the Russian ITAR-Tass news agency, as the worst mine accident in the region in 60 years.

According to regional governor Aman Tuleyev, among those killed were 20 top mine officials, including the chief engineer, who had been inside checking a British-made hazard monitoring system. British citizen Ian Robertson was also killed in the blast, along with his interpreter. Robertson worked for the British-German mining consultancy group IMC, and was there performing a coal reserves audit.

“There was a bang and smoke, [and] then the rescuers came,” miner Alexei Lobodo told Russian First Channel television. “We switched on our safety kits and started going to the surface. Five of us came out. First they helped me to walk, [and] then it was all normal, and I came back to my senses.”

The causes of the blast are as yet largely unknown, and many official sources have scrambled to provide various reasons. As is almost always the case with such catastrophes, however, the role of a social and economic system in which private profit takes precedence over safety standards is methodically obscured.

Nikolai Kultyn, an inspector with the federal Russian industrial safety agency, Rostekhnadzor, said that there were no gas monitors where the pocket of methane gas accumulated. According to Kultyn, the 107 deaths were likely due to the fact that so many people were in such a

small area at the time of the blast.

“The explosion wasn’t so strong as to destroy the mine’s equipment,” he said. “This was a coincidence of circumstances; so many people gathered so close to the epicenter.” The reason for this large concentration of people in such a small area, however, was left unexplained.

Rostekhnadzor said in a statement that it was unlikely that faulty equipment had caused the explosion, and that investigators were looking into soil subsidence or human error as possible causes. The agency also said that mine operators had passed recent safety tests, and that the mine had all necessary operating licenses.

“The main theory being considered by the prosecutor’s office is violations of mining work rules,” Kemerovo regional prosecutor Alexei Bugayets told the Interfax news agency, again failing to illuminate what rules the mining company had ignored.

A Reuters reporter said huddles of miners’ relatives were standing outside the morgue in the nearby town of Novokuznetsk, many crying and clenching death certificates in their hands. One man said that his son, Nikolai, had worked in the mine for seven years. He left behind a one-year-old daughter.

Illustrating the predatory activities that are now largely commonplace in post-Soviet capitalist Russia, an expensively-dressed undertaker circulated among the mourners, offering his services. “Of course, tastes differ nowadays,” he said. “Some prefer black marble, some prefer white, some prefer a combination of the two,” referring to the coffins that he was looking forward to selling to the dead miners’ family members.

Russia’s mining industry fell into disrepair when government subsidies largely evaporated after the Stalinist bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union in 1991. This pattern has been repeated in all of the countries of the former Soviet bloc, as international capital has been

reaping huge profits from newly privatized industries that were previously owned and operated by the state.

The rate of mining accidents and deaths in the former Soviet bloc is second only to that of China.

The Ulyanovskaya mine is located in the region known as the Kuznetsk basin, which contains some of the world's richest coal reserves. The heart of the area is called the Kuzbass, where most of the population works as miners or in mining-related industries.

The mine was relatively modern, having only been opened in 2002, and is owned and operated by Yuzhkuzbassugol, Russia's largest underground coal mining firm. Yuzhkuzbassugol is an affiliate of the Russian coal and steel company Evraz Group SA, which acquired a 50 percent stake in the company in 2005. According to the Evraz web site, Yuzhkuzbassugol is Russia's leading producer of coking coal, or coal used to make steel, with an output of 14 million tons in 2005.

In recent years, conglomerates such as Evraz SA have bought up coal mines and similar enterprises, consolidating their operations. They then sell raw and semi-processed material to steel smelters, electricity producers, and other major industries.

In the process, safety standards are routinely sacrificed at the altar of private profit. Russian labor union officials blamed the recent explosion in the Ulyanovskaya mine in part on a quota system that encourages miners to work faster for the purposes of increased productivity.

Alexander Sergeyev, head of the Independent Trade Union of Russian Miners, told the news media that 60 to 70 percent of the average 15,000 roubles (\$575) that miners take home monthly is made up of bonuses paid out for productivity.

"It's well understood that if a person—and I don't want to blame miners—is put in such conditions and adheres to all the rules of technical safety, he won't earn anything," Sergeyev told the Reuters news agency.

Obviously, such dangerous methods encourage carelessness, which can in turn lead to catastrophe.

Other mining experts pointed to the fact that many mines were hastily shut down after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and then were hastily reopened as rising prices for coal made them profitable again, with little attention to maintenance on either occasion.

An examination of some Russian mining disasters over the past ten years reads like a somber tally sheet of what could largely have been preventable tragedies.

Just ten years ago, 67 miners were killed in Novokuznetsk due to a methane explosion, close to the

Ulyanovskaya mine that is now the epicenter of tragedy. The same town also witnessed the deaths of 47 miners in 2004. Two miners have died in the past month alone in the same region, after shafts collapsed in the mines in which they were working.

In January 1998, a powerful explosion at the Tsentralnaya mine in the Arctic town of Vorkuta killed 27 miners.

On February 9, 2005, an explosion in the Yesaulskaya mine in Kemerovo, the same region in which the recent disaster has taken place, killed 21.

At least 30 workers died in Russian mining accidents last year, including 25 killed in a fire at a Siberian gold mine close to the border with China.

The Russian government has responded to the disaster in the Ulyanovskaya mine with crocodile tears.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sent the miners' families his condolences and said that he was ordering an investigation. He also ordered an inquiry into another disaster, which occurred shortly afterwards. A fire swept a nursing home in the southern city of Kamyshevatskaya, killing 62 people.

"You have to do your best to investigate the reasons at the highest level . . . and to draw corresponding conclusions," Putin told Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov.

These words, however, are thoroughly hollow. As a representative of a nationalist wing of Russia's ruling oligarchy, which made its fortunes from 1991 onwards through the plundering of what had originally been Soviet state property, Putin's "investigation," if it even materializes, will amount to nothing but a whitewash of the role that the criminal elements he represents play in the post-Soviet capitalist state and privatized industry.



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