

Russian mine disaster kills at least 38

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A gas explosion in a Siberian coal mine Thursday morning claimed the lives of at least 38 miners, while leaving several others injured.

The industrial tragedy at the Yubilenaya mine, 1,850 miles east of Moscow, comes little more than two months after the country's deadliest mining disaster in more than 60 years. A similar explosion of methane gas killed 110 coal miners at the neighboring Ulyanovskaya mine on March 19.

Both mines were owned and operated by the same company, Yuzhkuzbasugol, one of Russia's largest underground coal mining firms. Nearly half of the company's stocks are controlled by the steel giant Evraz, which is largely owned by the Russian billionaire oligarch Roman Abramovich. Evraz issued a statement in the wake of the tragedy reaffirming its commitment "to ensure continuous value creation for Evraz shareholders" while adding that it would "also consider all possible steps and actions to decrease the level of technological and operational risks of Yuzhkuzbasugol."

It is this overriding drive for profit and the corruption of Russian state agencies charged with mine safety that lie at the heart of the mounting death toll in the mines in Siberia and elsewhere. The death toll for this year so far at Yuzhkuzbasugol, the country's fourth-largest coal producer, has now risen to 149, more than double the 68 who died throughout the Russian coal industry in 2006.

In Thursday's disaster, 217 miners had been working more than 1,500 feet underground at the time of the explosion. While 179 made it alive to the surface, at least three were said to be critically injured.

The mine had been repeatedly cited for serious safety violations by Russia's Federal Environmental, Engineering and Nuclear Supervision Agency, which sought to force a suspension of work at Yubilenaya. Corporate management, however, managed to have the

agency's orders overturned by a local court, including as recently as April 10.

In a statement, the watchdog agency said it had only managed to force brief shutdowns of several hazardous areas in the mine, including the shaft where Thursday's fatal blast took place.

"The owner and administration of the mine had repeatedly allowed violations of safety conditions of mine operations," the agency said.

The same agency conducted the investigation into the March 19 catastrophe at the Ulyanovskaya mine. It concluded that the immediate cause of the explosion was a short circuit caused by a shoddy repair on an electric cable.

It also found that mine safety devices that automatically cut off electrical power when dangerous levels of methane gas are detected had been illegally disabled to prevent an interruption in production.

"If the sensors are correctly adjusted, electricity is switched off when the concentration of methane rises, and work in the mine is stopped until the reasons are corrected," Konstantin Pulikovsky, the head of the agency explained. "If the protection system goes off frequently, coal production suffers."

The agency concluded that all levels of management at the mine were responsible for this practice and turned the information over to prosecutors for a possible criminal case.

The RIA Novosti news agency quoted the governor of the Kemerovo Region as saying he agreed with the agency's findings. "I fully agree with the commission's conclusions," said Aman Tuleyev. "The accident's cause was the deliberate actions of the Yuzhkuzbasugol company, and all responsibility lies with the company management. This is a deliberate crime committed in order to increase coal production."

Only days before Thursday's disaster at the Yubilenaya mine, the agency fired five of its mine

inspectors for allowing management at the Ulyanovskaya mine to “breach safety rules in order to make a profit,” the *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper reported.

Union officials have charged that the miners themselves were coerced into accepting the criminally hazardous conditions in the mines because of the piecework pay system implemented in the privatized industry after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. While a minimal amount is paid as a flat-rate hourly wage, the bulk of compensation is determined by the amount of coal produced.

The *New York Times* quoted Ivan I. Mokhachuk, head of the Independent Union of Coal Manufacturing Workers, as saying, “While volume, productivity and profits have risen since the coal industry was privatized ... individual workers are worse off,” because of the slashing of wages and pensions.

The safety agency has threatened to rescind the Yuzhkuzbasugol company’s license to operate mines in the region. The threat prompted a warning from a miners’ union that this would only serve to throw thousands of coal miners out of work.

Instead, a union official affirmed, the government should enforce safety procedures in the mines. “Underground coal extraction without the necessary clearing of methane from the mine’s surface must be forbidden,” Aleksandr Sergeev, chairman of the Russian Union of Miners, told the *New York Times*.

The unions’ protests and threats by the mine safety agency notwithstanding, there seems little likelihood that the government will enforce such standards. The regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin represents precisely that layer of the new capitalist oligarchy that has enriched itself through the looting of state enterprises and the ruthless exploitation of labor.

In the final analysis, the back-to-back disasters in the Siberian coalmines are part of the terrible price being paid by the working class of the former Soviet Union for the restoration of capitalism and the subordination of all economic activity to the drive for profit.



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