

More than 100 dead in Ukraine mine disaster

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A devastating accident in a coal mine in eastern Ukraine on November 18 has left more than 100 dead. Approximately 1,000 metres below ground, the Zasyadko mine near the city of Donetsk filled with methane gas that then exploded. More than 450 men were working underground at the time. Rescue attempts were made more difficult by the fire that raged in the pit for several hours. Days following the accident many workers are still missing, for whom there can be little hope of survival.

This latest pit disaster—the most serious in the country’s history—is only one in a whole series of mining accidents in Ukraine, Russia and the other former Soviet republics. It shows again the bloody price that workers living in the former Soviet Union are paying for the restoration of capitalism and the subordination of economic activities to the profit system.

In September this year, 13 workers died in an accident at the same mine. According to miners’ union representatives, nothing was done following the earlier accident.

At present, some 10,000 work in the Zasyadko pit, mining up to 10,000 tonnes of coal a day. Two serious accidents have already claimed the lives of more than 100 miners in recent years. Eight years ago, in the neighbouring area of Luhansk, the most serious accident so far cost 80 people their lives.

The pit in Zasyadko began operations in 1958 and since then has never been properly modernised. Of approximately 200 pits in Ukraine, only 10 were modernised in the last 20 years. The technology employed has become hopelessly outdated and is inadequate from the standpoint of the most basic safety requirements. Zasyadko is not even one of the oldest pits in Ukraine; a third of all the mines in the country are more than 100 years old.

The majority of Ukrainian mines are completely run-down. Most do not even have sensors to warn of the danger of gas. The age of the equipment means a rising accident and death rate among miners. Statistically, every million tonnes of coal produced in Ukraine in recent years has meant 5 dead and 350 injured miners. On average, one miner dies underground each day.

The *Berlin Tagesspiegel* commented: “This is the reason

why in Ukraine, alongside the statistics for production costs, prices and profitability of a pit there is another column: How many human lives do one million tonnes of coal cost? Twenty years ago, the average was 1.54; 10 years ago the figure was 3.62 and rising.”

Coal mining is one of the main sources of income in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, productivity in the mines is very low compared with other states. A Ukrainian miner produces only approximately 100 tonnes of coal per year. By comparison, in Poland it is 400 tonnes, and in the US, 4,000 tonnes.

To run the mines at a profit, the operators have abandoned all safety precautions and pay miserable wages. Mining is one of the few jobs in the east of the country offering a chance to earn a living. A Ukrainian miner earns on average US\$100 a month, comparatively better wages than most Ukrainians. Miners are lucky, however, to actually receive these wages. According to union estimates, workers are owed millions in unpaid wages, although they are provided with meals at work and receive healthcare via the company.

Low wages and piecework force the miners to ignore safety regulations and take life-threatening risks. As in neighbouring Russia, part of the wage is calculated according to the quantity of coal produced on a shift. Experts have criticised this system in Ukraine for a long time. Payment according to production quotas puts workers under pressure to continue mining even when the concentration of methane gas is too high.

The extremely low productivity of the Ukrainian pits has led to several mines being closed in recent years. High unemployment and the generally precarious social situation have led to a further cruel phenomenon: more and more people are forced to mine illegally in the shut-down pits.

These self-made pits are called “Scháchty Otschájanja,” or mines of despair. Using ancient equipment and under constant danger of collapse, former miners work here for 10 to 12 hours for as little as 1 or 2 euros a day, producing coal that is then sold on the black market. There are no statistics covering these mines, but one can assume that dozens of people lose their lives in them each year.

President Viktor Yushchenko, who travelled to Donetsk

following the disaster and has since called for a three-day period of state mourning, has accused his rival of many years, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, of failing to reform the mining industry and improve safety standards. While this is probably true, responsibility for the recurring disasters is borne by the country's entire ruling elite.

The mines play an important role for enterprises and government in Ukraine. They provide energy for the iron industry, which is also located in the east of the country, thus reducing the need to spend foreign currency on procuring energy from the world market. Moreover, politicians and senior civil servants have enriched themselves by siphoning off the funds that were actually intended to modernise the pits. The World Bank alone has provided Ukraine with several hundred million dollars for the restructuring of the run-down pits. A large part of this money has simply evaporated through corruption.

Like the entire economic system of the country, corruption also marks this branch of industry. Most pits are partially state-owned and are operated by people who enjoy the best relations with the political cliques that have governed the Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Zasyadko is a prime example. The chairman of the supervisory board of the mine is Yukhym Zvyagilsky, a former prime minister and an influential figure in the so-called Donetsk clan. Zvyagilsky worked during the Soviet era as a mining engineer and was a director of several pits. In 1990, he was elected to parliament to represent Donetsk.

His contacts with the ruling powers helped him to exploit the changes that came about in the course of Ukraine's independence to further develop his influence. Starting from 1992, Zvyagilsky became chairman of the Donetsk town council and in 1993 was first deputy prime minister of Ukraine. From September 1993 to June 1994, he temporarily held the office of prime minister. In 1994, he was elected as a delegate to the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada. Until his dismissal, Zvyagilsky enjoyed close political contacts with the former head of state, Leonid Kuchma. During his term as a head of government, Zvyagilsky was repeatedly accused of conducting illegal sales of national energy reserves. However, his good relations with the highest echelons of the legal system meant that he never faced any charges.

The Donetsk group is a known quantity in Ukrainian politics and exerts substantial influence, particularly through Viktor Yanukovych. The economic basis for the political influence of the Donetsk group is formed by the Corporation Industrialny Soyuz Donbassa (Industrial Union of Donbass), which has grown since 2001 to become the second largest Ukrainian company. The enterprise controls the entire supplies of coal and natural gas for the industrial companies of the region. Its subsidiaries include several mines and

industrial companies, and also the football club Shakhtar Donetsk, whose president, the multibillionaire Rinat Akhmetov, is also one of the most powerful men in the region. Akhmetov largely financed Yanukovych's election campaigns and is also a parliamentary deputy for his Party of the Regions.

The cornerstone of the power of the Donetsk elite is their exclusive control of the country's coal-mining sector. Zvyagilsky has played a key role in this. As an important member of the Stalinist power elite, he was able to push through new ownership structures in the mining industry.

The region's miners were considered to be very militant, and protests against the selling off of the state-owned property were not infrequent. With the help of the local trade unions, Zvyagilsky was able to keep the workers in check and deliver up a profitable industry to the new elite. When miners took strike action in summer 1993, raising social and political demands and calling for new elections, Zvyagilsky, as well as other regional leaders, took over the government in Kiev, in order to tame the "wild east."

Today, Zvyagilsky is chairman of the board of the corporation that runs Zasyadko, and in that capacity bears responsibility for the miners' deaths. Zvyagilsky rejects all responsibility for the disaster and claims that much money was invested in the safety of the mine in recent years. His attitude is characteristic of the criminal, corrupt elite that has enriched itself on the backs of the general population, and which exclusively follows its own interests.

When the anger of the family members of the dead miners became too loud to overlook, and some of the media pointed to the lack of safety precautions, he told the *Delo* newspaper: "If so many people die and no one knows the reasons, then perhaps the mine must be closed." There could hardly be a more cynical and contemptuous statement. Zvyagilsky is posing an ultimatum that the miners either accept their fatally dangerous working conditions, or they will no longer have any work.



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