

Chinese mine explosion kills more than 100

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China's state-owned coal mining industry recorded another bloody day last Saturday, when at least 104 miners died in a massive gas explosion. The disaster occurred at Hegang, in the northeastern Heilongjiang province, inside a major coal mine owned by the provincial government's Heilongjiang Longmei Mining Holding Group.

There were 528 workers working underground when the blast erupted in the early morning of Saturday. As of Sunday, over 420 workers had escaped, but hopes for the four still trapped underground were rapidly diminishing. Of the survivors, more than 60 were hospitalised with broken bones, gas poisoning or respiratory injuries.

The blast, which occurred 500 metres underground, was so powerful that a nearby pit-top building was destroyed, while the windows of the other buildings were shattered. Hundreds of rescuers were sent to save the trapped workers. However, Zhang Fucheng, an official who headed the rescue effort, told the state television network CCTV that dense gas and collapsed tunnels were holding up the rescue operations, amid freezing temperatures of -10C.

Survivors recounted their horrifying escape. Wang Jiguo, who monitored the gas levels in the shaft, told Associated Press that after he saw gas levels rise sharply, he grabbed two colleagues near him and scrambled to the exit, shouting: "Run quickly, don't carry anything!" Fu Maofeng, a worker who escaped with Wang and is in a hospital intensive care unit, said he phoned workers still underground and told them to get out. "Just after we hung up the phone, we heard a loud bang from inside the shaft. The entrance of the shaft started shaking." A wave of searing hot air then slammed them to the ground. When he woke up, Fu found himself in hospital with his face covered with scratches, and burns on his left eye.

Wang Xingang told China National Radio: "We were preparing to evacuate when the explosion occurred, sending glass and rocks flying everywhere. We began running out and shouting to evacuate. Smoke was everywhere. I couldn't see at all. I was trying to feel my

way out from my memory of the shaft."

Victims' families were in shock too. Huang Guizhen, the wife of an injured miner, told Reuters: "When I saw my husband, this mess of blood and flesh, I didn't recognise him at first. Then the doctor told me it was my husband and I burst into tears."

The Hegang deaths came just after an explosion that killed 79 workers at a private coal mine in Henan province's Pingdingshan city in September. In November 2005, 171 died at the Dongfeng mine owned by the same Heilongjiang Longmei Mining Holding Group. More than 3,200 Chinese miners were killed last year. In the first half of 2009, at least 1,175 have died already.

Conflicting accounts surround the latest disaster. A miner, Hu Yu, told the *China Daily* that he had nearly passed out due to rising levels of gas in the mine two hours before the explosion. A company spokesman denied there was any sign of excessive gas beforehand.

Whatever the exact circumstances, the higher demand for coal during the freezing winter, which drives up coal prices, is putting pressure on managements to ignore warning signs and other safety procedures in order to meet production targets.

The BBC noted that the disaster had caused an "angry public" in China, and pointed to the sentiment expressed via Internet. One posting declared: "Those who escaped this tragedy will have to go down again to work. What happens next time or the time after that? Will they continue to be lucky?"

Fearing protests, Beijing sent Vice Premier Zhang Dejiang to the scene to set up an investigation team. As in other disasters, the most likely outcome will be the prosecution of several scapegoats. The mine's director, deputy director and chief engineer were fired immediately, while CCTV reported that a prosecutor would launch a probe into whether criminal negligence led to the disaster.

State media highlighted personal calls by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao for all-out rescue efforts, in order to show that Beijing was not indifferent to the

deaths. Heilongjiang governor Li Zhangshu cynically declared: “We must put safety first. Development is important, but the growth of GDP shouldn’t be achieved at the price of miner’s blood.”

In fact, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime’s free-market policy and brutal capitalist exploitation of workers is the primary source of the death and destruction in China’s coal industry. Three-quarters of the country’s electricity is generated by coal to power the country’s rapid industrialisation. Basic industry as a whole is characterised by sweatshop conditions, low wages and suppression of any protests of workers. Almost 100,000 Chinese workers are killed every year in industrial accidents in the drive to increase output.

While almost 80 percent of China’s mining deaths have occurred in privately-run, poorly-equipped and often illegal coal pits, high death tolls have become a feature of large state mines in recent years. The mine involved in the latest tragedy had annual capacity of 1.45 million tonnes of coal and was fitted with modern equipment, including a state-of-the art electronic system to identify the miners working underground. The real problem is not so much one of equipment, but the drive to maximise profit at the expense of workers’ safety and lives.

A study by Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin* published in October on the Shanxi provincial government’s program to merge and take over small private mines since September 2008, found that state-owned mines are just as deadly. By October this year, 90 percent of the small and medium mine owners had already agreed to deals, with the province’s state enterprises taking 80 percent of equity and up to 68 percent of management. Yet, on February 22, one of the deadliest explosions in recent years killed 78 workers at the Dunlan coal mine run by the state-owned Shanxi Coking Coal Group.

The *China Labour Bulletin* study explained that so-called “nationalisation” did not improve safety because the state-owned firms are responsible for profits and losses, and thus their disregard of workers’ lives matches that of the private owners.

The study stated: “In the 1990s, in order to improve profitability, most state-owned coal mines introduced a system in which mine shafts were contracted out to private operators. In other words, our state-owned coal mines have been ‘state-owned but private managed’. As such, many state-owned coal mines have no direct relationship with the miners working in the mine shaft; the mine managers only sign contractors who control

miners’ jobs, wage levels and even their lives. Managers of state-owned coal mines do not care, or even ask about the wages given to miners by the contractors, their working hours, rest time, working conditions or social security benefits etc.”

Under these conditions, despite having modern coal extraction equipment, alarm systems and safety rules on paper, the state-owned mines have become sites of large accidents. In October 2004, 148 miners died in a gas explosion at the Daping mine operated by the Coal Industry Group of Zhengzhou, Henan; in November the same year, 166 died in the Chenjiashan coal mine owned by the Tongchuan Mining Bureau of Shanxi; in February 2005, 214 died at the Sunjiawan mine operated by the Mining Industry Corporation of Liaoning; and in August 2007, 181 died at the Xintai mines run by the Shandong-based Huayuan Mining Co.—to name just a few of the worst accidents.

In response to the latest Hegang disaster, the National Development and Reform Commission, the national regulator, has banned the Heilongjiang Longmei Mining Holding Group from selling shares for three years. The group had planned an initial public offering (IPO) to raise 10 billion yuan (\$US1.5 billion) on the Chinese share market.

Barring an individual company from profiting from the highly lucrative IPO process, which is often engineered by major international financial institutions, is nothing more than a PR exercise. The executives of all nominally state-owned coal and other major corporations are increasingly under pressure from the stock market to increase returns to investors, driving up output at the expense of workers’ safety and lives.



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