

China's mine deaths: The brutal face of global capitalism

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The tragic death of 104 workers in China's latest coal mine disaster at Hegang city in Heilongjiang Province last week is a glaring reminder of the brutal exploitation of the country's 400 million workers, whose sweat and labour constitute the foundations of Chinese and global capitalism.

While the international financial press speaks of China as the bright spot in the world economy and cites the various statistics of high output and growth, the poverty-level wages, oppressive and unsafe conditions, and huge social costs involved are assiduously ignored.

The deaths of the miners in Heilongjiang Province are a product of the transformation of China into a giant sweatshop for global capital. Amid the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the drive for super-profits in China has only intensified, presided over by a Stalinist police state that ruthlessly suppresses any opposition by workers.

Thousands of miners die every year as China's coal industry expands to meet skyrocketing demands for more power and steel. Annual output increased from 1 billion tonnes in 2000 to 2.63 billion tonnes last year. China now consumes more than one third of the world's total coal production and demand is likely to surpass 3 billion tonnes by 2010. In the drive for corporate profit, the lives of China's five million coal miners are simply expendable.

The disaster is the second in less than four years in the Heilongjiang Longmei Mining Holding Group, one of the country's largest and most modern state-owned coal corporations. In November 2005, 171 miners lost their lives in the company's Dongfeng mine.

What has happened at the Hegang mine over the past few days is a rerun of the tragedy at Dongfeng four years ago. When the Dongfeng miners were killed, the government, at the central and provincial levels, went into damage control to placate public anger. A few managers were arrested and made scapegoats. Apologetic officials promised TV cameras that there would be no more disasters. An investigation found as usual that basic safety measures were ignored to boost output. A cosmetic safety drive was launched to shut down illegal small mines, leaving large state-owned and private companies untouched. Any protests by the families of victims were quickly silenced by police. Once public attention shifted to other matters, the mining companies returned to business as usual—until the next major catastrophe.

On average, 13 miners die in China every day. Most deaths occur in thousands of small and private-owned mines, where conditions are barbaric. In 2007, a scandal erupted in Shanxi and Henan provinces over the use of slave labour in coal mines and brick kilns. Hundreds of workers, many of them children, had been sold as slaves to toil up to 16 hours a day in filthy and dangerous conditions. But as the latest disaster demonstrates, conditions of brutal exploitation are not isolated to small private operators. While the Hegang mine had up-to-date equipment and safety procedures on its books, in practice dangerous shortcuts were taken to maximise output and profits.

In 2006, the National Development and Reform Commission issued a plan to concentrate the coal industry into five to six giant conglomerates by merging or shutting down all small mines in the main

coal producing provinces by 2015. The Heilongjiang Longmei Holding Group is one of the emerging conglomerates, with 88,000 employees in Hegang city alone. Far from improving safety, the merger plan will produce disasters of a larger scale.

The latest mine tragedy is another indictment of Maoism and Stalinism, which was always based upon the explicit rejection of genuine Marxism and socialist internationalism. From the 1980s onward, the police state regime established by Mao in 1949 proved particularly attractive to global investors as they sought cheap labour to overcome falling profitability and economic downturn.

The Hegang catastrophe not only underscores the horrific conditions facing workers in the mines and throughout China's burgeoning industry, but is a warning to workers around the world. The processes of consolidation and restructuring taking place in China's coal industry are typical of the response of the capitalist class in every country to the global economic crisis. In the scramble to survive, corporations are engaged in a ruthless drive to downsize and cut costs at the expense of the working class. More and more, the sweatshop conditions facing Chinese workers are becoming the benchmark for workers everywhere.

The mine explosion in northeastern China occurred just days after US President Barack Obama visited Shanghai and expressed his admiration for General Motors in China—now the most profitable operation for the American auto giant. While GM went into bankruptcy and has announced sweeping job shedding and cost-cutting measures in the US, its production in China is continuing to rapidly expand. The wages and conditions in the US will increasingly be brought into line with China as the corporation uses the huge reserve army of cheap labour in China to batter down the resistance of workers in the US and other countries.

On a broader scale, Obama called for a “rebalancing” of global economic relations, pointing in particular to the mammoth US trade deficit with China and China's huge purchases of US debt. The burdens of “rebalancing” will inevitably fall on the working class. Making American goods “competitive” in China,

where the official minimum wage is about \$150 a month, will mean massive cost-cutting by US firms. Reducing the mountain of US government debt will mean a further savage slashing of essential social services such as health care and education.

Just as GM's “rebalancing” resulted in plant closures in North America and expansion in China, so the wider processes will lead to systematic job destruction, the lowering of wages, longer hours and increasingly unhealthy and dangerous conditions that will inevitably produce tragedies like that at the Hegang mine. There is never any end to the race for “international competitiveness” and profit. A downturn in the consumption of American workers will, in turn, cut the demand for Chinese exports, leading to plant closures, job losses and further cost-cutting in China.

Within the confines of capitalism, there is no way out of this endless downward spiral. Workers in China, the US and internationally can defend their common class interests only by unifying their struggles against global capital and its political representatives. In many cases, as with GM, they are employed by the same corporations, which pit them against each other. An end to this fratricidal competition is possible only on a socialist basis through the abolition of the profit system and the systematic reorganisation of the world's vast productive resources to meet the pressing social needs of humanity, not the profits of the wealthy corporate elite.

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