

Australia: Miner killed at BHP Billiton nickel mine

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16 April 2010

Forty-five year-old miner Wayne Ross was killed on April 11 at BHP Billiton's Nickel West Perseverance mine at Leinster, almost 1,000 kilometres northeast of Perth, the Western Australian state capital. Ross, who has a partner and a four-year old daughter, died after the heavy excavator vehicle or "bogger" he was driving plummeted 18 metres down a shaft to the next level of the underground mine.

The accident occurred at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday but his body was not recovered until 18 hours later. An emergency services officer initially attempted to reach Ross at the bottom of the shaft soon after the accident but the conditions were too dangerous.

It is not yet clear whether Ross, who had worked at the mine over an eight-year period, died immediately or during the long hours he was trapped in the vehicle. He is one of eight workers, including two miners, who have been killed in workplace accidents in Western Australia (WA) so far this financial year.

Two investigations into Ross's death are underway—one by the state Department of Mines and Petroleum and another by workplace safety officials—as well as a police inquiry for the state coroner. Like scores of other such official investigations, however, these will produce no real changes in health and safety for workers in the highly profitable and dangerous mining industry.

The company—one of the world's largest mining corporations—and the WA state Liberal government responded to the accident with the usual political damage control.

Nickel West president Wayne Isaacs cynically declared that mine safety was "always the company's highest priority". BHP Billiton's "priority", of course, is profit and production. Its Nickel West subsidiary is the world's third-largest nickel miner, generating 16 percent of total global production and approximately \$1.6 billion in annual export earnings.

The Leinster operation has the capacity to produce three million tonnes of ore a year, most of it exported to China. A company spokesperson told *Mining Weekly Online* that limited underground operations at Leinster would begin again on Wednesday—two days after Ross's death—with full production resumed in a few weeks.

After meeting with BHP Billiton senior executives, WA Mines Minister Norman Moore told the media that the latest fatality was "extremely disappointing given previous efforts to address safety issues at this mine. I am aware of the genuine bid by BHP Billiton to improve its record in this area ..."

These comments are a whitewash, designed to protect the company and an industry upon whose profits and export earnings the state and national economies increasingly depend. BHP Billiton has a record of serious accidents in its mine and plants in Western Australia pointing to a lack of adequate safety measures.

* In May 2004 a gas explosion at the company's Port Hedland iron plant in the Pilbara region killed one worker and left three others with serious burns.

* In 2006 a miner was killed in an explosives accident at the Leinster mine.

* In a nine-month period during 2008–09, seven workers were killed at BHP Billiton operations in WA. Five deaths occurred at its iron ore facilities in the Pilbara, and two at its Yandi mine.

* Last June the Leinster mine was the site of two major rock-falls in the space of three weeks. Although no one was killed, the first incident involved a 250-tonne rock-fall that trapped one miner underground for 16 hours. In the second incident, other miners were trapped and one miner sustained back injuries.

The WA government directed BHP Billiton to commission an engineering investigation into the June 2009 incidents. The results of this inquiry have never been made public. When he was questioned by journalists about the Leinster report on Monday, Moore simply claimed he did not have the power to release it and insisted, without explanation, that its findings had no bearing on the latest fatality.

In response to Ross’s death, Labor’s state opposition leader, Eric Ripper, called for a royal commission into mine industry safety, and the mining unions—the Australian Workers Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union—issued perfunctory demands for more mining inspectors.

Union officials pointed out that BHP Billiton workers who raise safety issues are threatened with victimisation and blacklisting. That is no doubt true but the question that Labor and union spokesmen carefully skirt around is the role they have played in creating this situation over the past three decades. Riding roughshod over the resistance of workers, Labor governments and the unions have worked hand in glove with employers to erode hard-won health and safety conditions in mining and every other industry.

These attacks were pioneered under the Accord agreements struck between the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and the unions from 1983 to 1996 to make Australian industry “internationally competitive”. Workers opposing retrogressive measures such as 12-hour shifts, cuts to manning levels

and so-called multi-skilling were targeted by union officials and victimised.

These and other assaults on working conditions and basic rights, carried out under state and federal governments—Labor and conservative alike—have led to a sharp increase in workplace injuries in recent years. Between 2000–01 and 2005–06, the number of people suffering work-related injuries nationally jumped by 44 percent.

The federal Rudd government’s Model Work Health and Safety Bill, which is due to be implemented by the states and territories this year, will take this to a new level by replacing the already inadequate occupational health and safety (OHS) laws. The Bill is designed to drive up production and enhance corporate profitability by requiring that employers take only “reasonably practicable” steps to ensure safety.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the workplace relations minister, made “reform” of the OHS laws one of the highest priorities of their pro-business economic restructuring agenda when they took office in 2007. The result will be more mine fatalities and workplace casualties.



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