

The rescue at China's Wangjialing mine

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The rescue on April 5 of 115 construction workers trapped for more than a week in the flooded Wangjialing coal mine project in Shanxi province evoked two very different kinds of relief. Families and fellow workers of the trapped men who had been waiting anxiously for news were obviously relieved to hear that so many had been rescued. Working people across China, particularly those facing similar perils in other mines and dangerous industries, undoubtedly shared those sentiments.

However, the reaction of government officials and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was of quite a dissimilar character. They breathed a sigh of relief that the disaster, which their policies had helped create, would not become another potential focus of public anger and opposition. A stage-managed media operation swung into action to exploit the successful rescue to depict party and government bureaucrats as humane and competent.

Despite the rescue, a tragedy has occurred. As of this week, 37 workers have officially been confirmed dead. There is almost no hope of finding any more survivors, due to a dangerous build-up of gas underground. Some surviving workers estimate that the number of remaining victims could be as high as 140. The Chinese government has refused to release a full list of the missing, dead or rescued workers.

Last week's rescue was possible only by the solidarity of the trapped workers themselves, and the tireless and courageous efforts of rescue workers, many of whom risked their own lives and battled around the clock. But it was the CCP who claimed the credit and officials who were featured in the tightly controlled media coverage.

Live TV coverage showed rescued workers being rushed to waiting ambulances, and highlighted the first rescuee, who was able to clasp his hands to celebrate the successful operation. Workers were later shown lying in hospital beds meeting visiting officials. Viewers were not

told that the workers had been banned from meeting with their loved ones.

During the rescue operation, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao issued a letter to the trapped workers, declaring: "Dear fellow workers, the Party Central Committee, the State Council and the whole nation have been concerned for your safety all the time ... you must have confidence and hold on to the last!"

However, the CCP's main concern throughout was to keep a lid on the situation. Tens of thousands of workers die in industrial accidents every year amid the rush for faster growth and greater profits in China's hothouse capitalist economy. With the explosive growth of the Internet, officials can no longer easily cover up these accidents. As a result the Wangjialing disaster was already causing public outrage over the failure of the company and the government to prevent it.

During the rescue operations, coverage at the mine site was restricted to a few major Beijing-controlled agencies like China Central Television. Most media outlets, even local state-owned ones, were barred. The authorities instructed local taxi companies not to take journalists to the Wangjialing project, and traffic police checked cars moving in that direction. A police blockade around the mine also prevented relatives from entering the area. Fearing scenes of distress and anger, officials housed them in motels away from the mine site.

Above all, officials wanted to cover up the government's own responsibility for the disaster. The Wangjialing project, which is operated by a state-owned company, is a priority project in Beijing's 15th five-year economic plan. Clearly, the management was under government pressure to accelerate construction. The basic cause of the flooding that engulfed the workers on March 28 was that the company was trying to complete the mine five months ahead of schedule, despite warnings that

water was leaking into the shafts (see: “Another Chinese coal mining tragedy”).

The mine’s complex and narrow structure hampered efforts to pump out water. Signs of life only emerged on April 2, when rescuers heard tapping on pipes. Divers were sent into the tunnels but were forced to turn back. It was not until April 4, after water levels dropped significantly, that rescuers on rubber rafts could squeeze through narrow passages and pull out the first nine workers. The nine, who had been trapped in the upper section of a V-shaped shaft, were suffering from hypothermia, severe dehydration and skin infections.

The other 106 trapped workers managed to get above the floodwater by carefully digging open an abandoned tunnel. They ate whatever they could find—bark, wrapping paper from detonators and cotton from their clothes—drank the dirty water and huddled together to keep warm.

The survivors were all hospitalised, and 60 critically injured ones were sent to major hospitals in the provincial capital of Taiyuan via special chartered trains. Officials boasted to the press that the rescue cost up to 100 million yuan (\$US14.6 million). Of course, no such high-profile media treatment is given to the many other mining disasters, including an explosion that killed 40 workers in Henan province on March 31—just days after the Wangjialing mine flooded.

Again Beijing’s priority was to manage the media. According to the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, visits to the 55 workers who were sent to the hospitals in nearby Hejin city were under tight security. A hospital staff member explained: “The Hejin city government is keeping miners and their family members away from reporters to control information about the mine disaster after people earlier angrily accused the mine’s owners of ignoring safety risks ... Police searched small inns across the city and took away miners’ relatives.”

Only on April 10 were some hospitalised workers allowed to see their families for half an hour and then on limited days. In the meantime, a 2,000-strong “stabilisation” team had been sent to live with the families of the workers, not so much to help them, but to maintain daily surveillance and head off any protests. One worker’s wife, Guo Qinqin, told the *South China Morning Post* that she had no idea whether her husband Shi Weike was among the rescued 115, as the authorities had refused

to tell her.

Guo’s story also shed light on the conditions of workers in the coal mining industry. Her family was poor, with her husband as the only bread earner. He had been an electrical technician in illegal coal mines for more than 10 years, but lost his job during a 2008 crackdown on such mines. Farming provided insufficient income for living expenses and to pay school fees for their daughter. Finally, Shi was offered a job at the Wangjialing project in February, but it proved just as dangerous as illegal mines and paid him only 103 yuan, or just \$US15, a day.

At a meeting on Tuesday of the official investigation team into the Wangjialing disaster, Luo Lin, the director of State Work Safety Administration, admitted that the mine flooding “should, and could, have been avoided”. He acknowledged that the loss of life had been caused by poor safety standards and negligence. However, Luo had nothing to say about the government’s responsibility for the tragedy and proposed yet another toothless workplace safety campaign.

All the elaborate PR efforts to bolster the CCP’s image are directed at trying to suppress the underlying groundswell of resentment, hostility and anger among working people that they are simply exploited as cheap and entirely expendable labour.



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