

Tensions build in wake of Russian mine disaster

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18 May 2010

In the nine days since two explosions killed scores of miners at the Rospadskaya mine a political crisis has been building in the Kemerovo region in southwestern Siberia.

The official number of dead miners is 66, with 24 still buried in the mine and presumed dead. All last week, miners' families buried their loved ones. By Friday evening, a spontaneous meeting in the town of Mezhdurechensk grew to several hundred. A small delegation met with the town's mayor, demanding better pay and improved safety conditions.

Frustrated with the mayor's passivity, perhaps a hundred of the younger miners and townspeople blocked the nearby railway line for more than two hours. Twenty trains were delayed, many of them filled with freight. Special police detachments, the OMON, were called to clear the tracks.

Three attacks by 120 of the OMON troops were repulsed as the miners hurled rocks and bottles against their riot shields [see video]. On the fourth attempt, the tracks were cleared. Twelve of the police were seriously injured, and 28 protestors were detained. Some were beaten during arrest, which can be seen on the following video. The fact that the OMON forces were not local, but sent by the Federal Ministry of the Interior was not lost on the assembled families.

The miners have since announced that they will hold protests on May 22 in the 13 main cities of the Kuzbass mining region if their demands for higher wages and better safety are not met.

In the wake of the explosions, testimony has steadily emerged about the wretched pay and equally bad safety conditions at the mine. What clearly angered many of the people at the meeting on the 14th was the claim made earlier by the mine's director, Gennady Kozovoy, that miners make 80 thousand rubles per month (\$2,700). Some of the mass media repeated this highly exaggerated figure.

In fact, most miners make about 30,000 rubles per month (\$1,000), which keeps them permanently in debt. It turns out that only 30 percent of their pay is guaranteed, and the rest depends on meeting production quotas. If work is stopped due to high methane levels, then the miners are not paid above the 30 percent. As a result, methane detectors are often disabled in the mines—the miners are desperate to meet the quotas in order to feed their families.

Yet few miners are willing to go on the record about disabling the detectors. At the meeting, one did, as can be seen on the following video.

Here are excerpts of what two of the miners said on the video: "Not one of the bosses has come to ask our forgiveness. Not one has come to apologize to the mothers and wives [of the dead miners]. The sympathy they express is completely fake.

"We simply want to live like human beings. Everyone says that we receive huge pay, enormous pay. In fact, we live from paycheck to paycheck. If we don't meet the production quotas, we get 20,000 rubles. If we make the quota, 30 to 35, or a maximum of 40 thousand. On the average, we make 30-35 thousand. They keep us in such conditions that, for me, are impossible. I have to feed five in my family and on 25 thousand this is impossible. Therefore, people like me, for the sake of their families—not for the money—go to work in the mines. And, honestly speaking, we violate mine safety, disable the monitoring devices, because otherwise we couldn't make it. There is lots of gas. It is always present. Yes, we go to work for a miserable pittance, for next to nothing, and the bosses know this. They will say to us, if you come to us and report unsafe conditions, the most we can pay is 15-20 thousand. Everyone knows this."

Another miner said: "People have been told that they must claim that they make 40 thousand. If they say less, they will be fired. That is why people are silent. That is

why they are not talking. We all have debts. Look at the fellow standing next to me, he has five to feed.”

A woman at the rally said: “Everyone has debts. Look what happens. You come home with 20 thousand, and right way 18 thousand goes to the banks. That’s how we live. And they tell us: shut your mouths. If you complain, we’ll bring in Chinese, and they will work for less money.”

The miner standing next to her interrupted: “Everyone here is afraid. They all could say what is, but they won’t show their pay stubs. They are afraid. We all should show what we really make. Then people would know.” At that point, a young miner showed a stack of pay stubs, one of which showed 15,000 for the whole month.

The miners are demanding that their pay be increased, that they receive wages while the mine is reconstructed (if it is indeed reconstructed), and that the guaranteed portion of their pay be raised to 60 percent.

The governor of the region, Aman Tuleyev, has claimed that better pay will be forthcoming, but he has not explained how the owners of Rospadskaya, the Evraz group, will be forced to pay. Last year, Rospadskaya produced \$531 million in profit for its shareholders. The drive for higher productivity and increased demand for coal as the company looks to markets in South Korea, Japan and China undoubtedly contributed significantly to the unsafe conditions at the mine.

Several reports have confirmed what the miners say about safety. The technology exists to detect dangerous methane levels. If the amount of methane exceeds 2 percent, electricity is stopped in that mine sector and production stops. As a rule, if methane reaches 5 percent, an explosion is highly likely. To meet production quotas, miners sometimes put plastic bags or wet towels over the detectors. Or it may be that management disables some of the detectors. In any case, the levels at Rospadskaya obviously exceeded the safe minimum. In the week following the explosions, rescue efforts have been halted several times due to high methane levels.

In an interview last Sunday, one miner who survived the explosion described how several other miners he saw trying to escape the disaster suffocated because the emergency respirators each miner carries did not work. These safety devices, known as “self-rescuers”, weigh more than two kilograms and supply air that can last from 20 minutes to a couple of hours, depending on the model and the activity of the user. Among the bodies recovered at Rospadskaya, several did not have the self-rescuers, and several had malfunctioning units.

In studies of self-rescuers at other mine sites, many of these devices have proven poorly made and unreliable. On average they cost about \$100, and the best models, sometimes made in Germany, are often in short supply.

In any case, because of the horrific second explosion, which sent flames shooting out of the mine shafts and destroyed many surface structures, many of the miners were killed by the blast and flames.

Several of the demonstrators stressed that neither the city politicians, nor governor Tuleyev, nor Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had come to speak to them. Putin had flown in to inspect the ruins of the mine earlier in the week, and President Medvedev had visited six injured miners flown to Moscow hospitals. Apart from these photo-ops, little is being done to meet the miners’ demands for decent wages and working conditions. The rage of the miners and their families is growing.

In a clear attempt at damage control, Putin held a press conference on Monday. He promised increased mine safety regulation, and the creation of a new mine supervision. In addition, he said that miners’ guaranteed wages should be increased up to 70 percent of their total pay, rather than the 30 percent now:

“This will increase the safety of miners working underground and minimize the motivation of the miners to strive for greater extraction at any cost, ignoring the security and risking their lives.”

Putin added that miners should be paid when mining operations slow down or stop. “All miners should receive average salaries during lulls,” he said. “The state will do everything necessary to fulfill these tasks.”

Meanwhile, at a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, Viktor Zubkov, the governor of the Kemerovo region made the insolent and absurd claim: “Outside provocateurs are using the tragedy to destabilize the situation in the region, provoke unrest.” Tuleyev then added: “Somebody’s trying to turn it into another Kyrgyzstan or Greece.”



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