

A wave of mine disasters

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A series of coal mine disasters has taken place in recent weeks around the world, highlighting the ongoing sacrifice of workers' lives for profit and increased output. The latest, in which 17 miners died in a reported dynamite explosion last Saturday, was at the privately-run Shuguang Coal Mine near Chenzhou city in central China.

Despite significant technological advances, which now make it possible to detect dangerous methane levels, ventilate mines adequately, equip miners with personal safety devices and use electrical equipment to avoid gas and dust explosions, thousands of miners continue to lose their lives every year.

Just 12 days earlier, a methane gas explosion in northern Turkey on May 17 killed 30 miners. In that calamity, rescuers took four days to reach the bodies of 28 miners who had been trapped underground at the state-run Turkish Hard Coal Enterprises mine at Karadon, near the Black Sea port of Zonguldak. Two miners are still missing, with little hope held for their survival.

Turkey's was the fourth major coal mine catastrophe in less than two months. On March 28, at least 37 miners died in a flood inside the state-owned Wangjialing mine project in China's Shanxi province. On April 5, 29 US coal miners were killed by a blast at the corporate-owned Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia. On May 8, two explosions killed at least 66 Russian miners at the privately-owned Raspadskaya mine in the Kemerovo region in southwestern Siberia.

Despite differences between the countries involved, the tragedies have common features: poor pay and conditions, management demands for faster production and systemic flouting of safety rules. The state-owned

mines are driven by the same demands for higher production and greater profits as the private ones.

The men killed in northern Turkey were employed by a private company contracted to perform specific tasks in the state-owned Karadon mine. Since the 2004 Mining Law, the country's coal industry has been increasingly privatised and outsourced to contractors, with longer shifts, "flexible" work conditions, inadequate training and a lack of safety inspections. As a result, the number of mining deaths has soared. Already this year, 65 have been killed in 26 incidents.

In Siberia, most miners make about 30,000 rubles (\$US1,000) per month, but 70 percent of their pay is dependent on meeting production quotas. Methane detectors are often disabled because miners are desperate to meet the quotas in order to feed their families. Through these methods, the Raspadskaya mine produced a \$531 million profit last year for its owners, the giant Evraz group, as the company stepped up exports to South Korea, Japan and China.

At the West Virginia mine, owned by Massey Energy, safety inspectors found that ventilation fans were at only half the level needed to prevent the buildup of methane gas. The blatant disregard for safety coincided with the tripling of production at the mine last year and a cost-cutting drive by Massey at all its pits. Over the previous 18 months, the Upper Big Branch Mine had more than 600 safety violations, including for ventilation plans, escape routes and coal dust control, but the Mine Safety and Health Administration never sought to close the mine. Over the past decade, 52 miners have died at Massey pits.

In China's Shanxi province, the large Wangjialing project, operated by the state-owned Huajin Coking

Coal Company, supposedly followed stricter safety codes than the small, illegal private mines that are responsible for thousands of deaths each year. But the company was trying to complete the project five months ahead of schedule despite warnings that water was leaking into the shafts. The Chinese government has designated Wangjialing a priority project under its latest five-year economic plan, designed to boost energy supplies to meet the burgeoning requirements of private investors.

Each government responded to the latest tragedies with public gestures of condolence and more worthless promises to enforce safety standards. However, comments—remarkably similar—by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US President Barack Obama revealed the actual official attitude. On a brief visit to the Karodan mine, Erdogan provocatively referred to mining accidents as a matter of “fate,” which miners and their families willingly accepted. Likewise, Obama told a memorial service for the Virginia miners: “They knew there were risks and so did their families. They knew their kids would say a prayer at night before they left.”

In other words, such accidents are inevitable and must simply be accepted as a normal part of life. In reality, miners are driven by economic necessity to jeopardise their lives in dangerous mines. The risks to which they are exposed are not God-given but arise directly from the rapacious demands of the mine owners, and the entire corporate elite, aided by governments that constantly bend over backwards to protect their operations. In Obama’s case, nothing has improved in the transition from the Bush administration, which oversaw the 2006 disaster at the Sago Mine that killed 12 West Virginia miners.

Equally responsible are the trade unions, which in every country have long ago betrayed the miners, who were historically among the most militant and class-conscious sections of the working class. The corporatist United Mine Workers of America is not fundamentally different from the state-run unions in China. All of them operate as industrial policemen for governments and corporations in boosting production and suppressing any opposition by workers.

Objectively, coal miners in Turkey, Russia, the US and China are all part of a global industry that operates according to international benchmarks and prices. Companies backed by governments and trade unions are in a constant battle to maintain their competitive edge by pushing up productivity and cutting costs at the expense of their workforce. The tragic consequences are all too evident in the latest wave of disasters and deaths in mines around the world.

Like the working class as a whole, miners can only defend their livelihoods and lives by linking with their class brothers and sisters as part of an international movement against the mining companies, their government and union backers, and the profit system as a whole. To end the needless carnage in the world’s mining industry, the mines must be taken out of private hands and transformed into genuine public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working people themselves.

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