

Over 50 miners trapped in a Colombian coal mine

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As of Friday evening, 54 miners remained trapped in a coalmine in the Colombian town of Amagá, in the western Department of Antioquia, 20 miles southeast of the city of Medellín. Twenty-three miners were killed in the explosion at the San Fernando mine, and their bodies were recovered, many of them dismembered and badly burned. Twenty-eight were injured and rescued alive.

The explosion took place at 10:45 p.m. on Wednesday, June 16, during the change of shifts. As is increasingly common in coal mine disasters around the world, the accumulation of explosive gases in one of the mine's tunnels seems to have caused the explosion. The owner of the mine, Carbones San Fernando, has yet to provide any details.

The San Fernando mine was considered one of the most modern in the region. The central government's minister of mines said that the mine lacked basic safety equipment, such as working gas detectors and methane exhaust tubes.

A Spanish language video from Canal Actualidad relates that the mine had failed a safety inspection and was considered too dangerous to continue in operation.

Mine safety inspector Charris Ruiz, who led the inspection team in June that visited San Fernando, denied that the mine was inoperable. However he did confirm the minister's declaration about the absence of gas detectors and exhaust tubes.

"I did not include this in my report," said Ruiz, "because the regulations do not require every mine to have a continuous gas detector."

Given the conditions at the mine and the character of the explosion, first responders are pessimistic that the remaining miners will be found alive. Amagá's Mayor Auxilio Zapata announced that the municipal coliseum

had been set aside to receive the dead and wounded since the morgue at the cemetery did not have enough space. The mine operator announced that it would pay for burials.

Less than a year ago, in August 2009, nine miners were killed at a nearby mine, also by a methane explosion. No new safety requirements resulted from that explosion.

Walter Restrepo survived the San Fernando explosion with severe burns on his body; he was one of six miners that barely made it out of the mine. Interviewed at a local hospital, Restrepo described how, as he was leaving his shift, the explosion threw him and covered him in flames. "These were not normal flames, more like a burning shower, as if it were raining fire on top of me."

Relatives of the victims responded to the explosion by gathering at the mine entrance in search of news about their loved ones. Among the victims and the missing are many miners related to each other, escalating the impact of the explosion on the affected families. Some recalled how, in 1977, an explosion at the same mine killed 86 workers.

María Adelaida Ossa, whose brother and five cousins are among the missing, spoke to the Bogotá daily *El Tiempo* about her brother, who was hired at the mine a month and a half ago: "This is the only work available for young men in this region. He had moved from the city of Pereira in search of work with which to support his three-year-old son. What is really sad is that they are bringing out [survivors] with missing hands and feet."

Ossa's statement barely scratches the surface in terms of working conditions for the Colombian working class. High levels of unemployment and economic insecurity force Colombian youth to risk their lives

every day in mines whose operators are uninterested in providing safe conditions. Those same operators take advantage of those same high levels of unemployment to offer hunger wages. At the San Fernando mine, as in other mines in the region, wages range from US \$300 to US \$600 per month.

Colombia, a country in which half the population exists under the official (low) poverty line, also has an official unemployment rate of 12 percent. High as it is, this figure gives an optimistic picture of the state of the labor market. According to one study, between 40 and 60 percent of Colombian workers is part of an informal, underground economy, which exists in a constant stage of precariousness. Among that group, some 300,000 underage workers are employed by the mining sector.

On Thursday, the Spanish daily *La Voz de Galicia* reported that the accumulation of carbon monoxide and other gases in the mine makes it necessary to introduce a ventilation system before any rescue effort.

“We are not aware of any survivors,” declared Carlos Iván Márquez of the Colombian Red Cross, “It is our guess that the others have also perished. We need to—but haven’t been able to—enter the mine. Gases have filled the entrance and we need to work on ventilation.”

Due to the bad air, rescuers have not been able to advance very far into the mine. It could take days for methane and carbon monoxide levels to go down to a safe level.

The mine, that had been producing coal at a yearly rate of 240,000 tons, is 1,500 meters (5,000 feet) deep. At the time of the explosion, it employed some 480 workers on its night shift.

The explosion at the San Fernando mine has a lot in common with the February 2006 mine explosion in the Pasta de Concha mine in Mexico, in which 52 miners were buried alive from a methane explosion.

Like San Fernando, the Pasta de Concha mine was also subject to poor safety regulations and was allowed to continue to operate. The Pasta de Concha mine explosion was followed by a wave of mine disasters across the globe.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in May, since March of this year there have been five major mine disasters in China, Turkey, the United States, Russia and, now Colombia. (See: “A wave of mine disasters”.)

Whatever the technical reasons for the explosion, collapse or flood, each of these tragedies have one

common economic cause: cost cutting and speed-up, as mine operators attempt to extract as much surplus value as they can from their workers, as fast as they can, while minimizing safety.

The goal for the mining corporations is to generate profits as fast as possible, regardless of the life and limb of the workers.

Predictably, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe expressed his deep sorrow over the mine tragedy. It has become *de rigueur* for presidents and prime ministers to make such statements and call for investigations that are window dressing, while more miners, their families and the communities continue to pay a deadly price.



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