

China: Explosion at coal mine kills 48

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26 June 2010

An explosion at a coal mine in China's Hunan province Monday killed at least 48 people and seriously injured at least six others. This is the latest in a spate of mining tragedies, exposing the life-threatening conditions facing Chinese miners.

The explosion took place in an illegal, privately-owned mine, the Xingdong No.2 Mine in Weidong District, Pingdingshan City. It appears that the incident was caused by illegally purchased explosives that were stored in the shaft. Somehow, the explosives were accidentally set off while 76 miners were working. In addition to receiving burns, the workers were exposed to poisonous gases which were emitted as a result of the explosion.

The mine owner Liu Jianguo was arrested and the mine's finances were frozen. China Central Television footage showed that paramilitary police had sealed off the mine, in order to prevent relatives from staging any protests.

Just last September, another mine explosion in Pingdingshan killed 76 people. At the time, the authorities attempted to placate public anger by announcing major safety reviews of the city's 157 mines. Monday's tragic deaths have demonstrated the deceitful character of that safety campaign, which like previous ones throughout China, was nothing more than a public relations exercise.

According to local government officials, the mine's operating licence expired on June 6 and the district government shut off electricity supplies the next day. Despite this, the mine operated unhindered, with the knowledge and collusion of the authorities. Rather than securely sealing the shaft, it was closed with a movable concrete board.

In a stark expression of official complicity, coal continued to be produced after the mine became illegal, even though 10 district government supervisors were stationed at the mine.

The fact that local authorities were so heavily implicated prompted a response from the top levels of government. Mining accidents are a volatile issue in China, with the majority of miners being poor rural migrants. The continuing death toll has underscored the brutal capitalist exploitation in mining and other industries presided over by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

According to the official *China Daily*, the municipal government of Pingdingshan has blamed the disaster on four local officials, who were immediately removed from their positions in the CCP and the government on Monday afternoon. The highest ranking was the head of the district government, Yun Jianjun.

In addition, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao publicly exhorted rescue workers to spare no effort in attempting to save trapped miners following the explosion. According to official media reports, Zhao Tiechui, head of the State Administration of Coal Mine Safety, and Luo Lin, head of the state work safety bureau, traveled to Pingdingshan City to personally oversee the rescue operation.

Xinhua, the official news agency, reported Luo as saying: "The accident shows safety regulations were not strictly observed at the grassroots level and that some regulators may be in cahoots with mine owners."

His comments and the four sackings are an attempt to scapegoat individual local officials, and prevent a more

critical examination of the role of all levels of the government in pressing for increased output and profits. A similar charade has taken place in the wake of every major mine disaster.

According to official statistics, 2,631 miners were killed in China last year, an average of around six deaths a day. The figure is disputed, with independent labour organisations claiming that many accidents are covered up. The number of mining fatalities rose in the first quarter of this year, with 592 deaths compared to 509 in the corresponding period last year.

Last month produced a string of disasters. On May 14, an accident at a mine in Guizhou province killed over 20 workers. This was followed by a gas explosion at a coal mine in Shanxi on May 18 which resulted in the deaths of 10 workers. Another accident on May 30 killed at least 17 at a mine in central China.

While most deaths have occurred in small and often illegal private mines, workers at large private or state-owned mines face similar dangers. A June 18 statement published by the Shanghai-listed Pingdingshan Tianan Coal Mining Company, located in the same city as Monday's accident, reported that a blast at one of its coal mines killed five workers and left three missing.

The unwillingness of authorities to improve safety conditions in the mines is not accidental. It is bound up with dependence of China's economy on coal as the main source of energy, and the government's unwillingness to jeopardise profits in this sector. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Chinese coal production rose year-on-year by 28.1 percent in the first quarter, with an output of over 751 million tonnes.

Monday's disaster at the Xingdong No. 2 Mine illustrated the drive for higher productivity at the expense of safety. According to the State Administration of Work Safety, the mine was operating with technical upgrades aimed at raising annual output from 60,000 tonnes to 90,000 tonnes. According to some media reports, a similar accident took place at the same mine, two months ago, but this was denied by the vice mayor of Pingdingshan, Li Jianwei.

Following a high-profile catastrophe in Shanxi in March, when a mine flooded trapping 153 workers, officials again pledged greater safety measures. However, at the same time, Zhao Tiechui, head of the State Administration of Coal Mine Safety, acknowledged that it would take another 10 years to "fundamentally improve" mine safety.

In other words, mining disasters and the appalling safety conditions that cause them will continue for the foreseeable future, with workers treated as expendable commodities.

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