

UK Coal and miners' union close ranks after pit deaths

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Safety officials from the UK's coal mining industry met last week to "calm nerves" in the coal extraction market following the deaths of five miners in less than two weeks.

On September 27, Gerry Gibson was killed and fellow miner, Philip Sheldon, was injured after a roof collapse at the private Kellingley colliery, North Yorkshire in England. Just 12 days earlier, Charles Breslin, David Powell, Garry Jenkins and Phillip Hill, were killed in a flooding disaster at Gleision colliery, a drift mine in Swansea Valley, Wales.

A total of 17 miners have now died in UK coal mines in the last five years.

Kellingley colliery's owner, UK Coal—now the largest coal extractor in the country—issued a joint statement with the National Union of Miners (NUM) after the tragedy, promising a "rigorous inquiry".

Two of Gibson's colleagues had died at Kellingley in separate incidents in the last four years.

Kellingley, known as a "super-pit", is one of the most productive collieries in Europe, with just 800 men. It supplies fuel to a line of power stations between Leeds, West Yorkshire and Hull on the east coast, as well as smaller amounts of household coal.

The *Guardian* newspaper reported that "the NUM held back from detailed comment on the incident but the union's general secretary, Chris Kitchen, said, 'It's tragic what's happened and it should never have happened and the investigation will conclude what did go wrong.'"

Pat Carragher, chief executive of the British Association of Colliery Management trade union, said prior to the meeting of the mining industry safety and leadership group—which advises the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), and of which he is a member—that it would consider if the incident was part of a worsening

trend. But his comments indicate an early attempt to extricate companies such as UK Coal from responsibility.

"We cannot pre-empt the inquiries into these latest cases", Carragher said. "But over the past few years there have been a couple of occasions where there has been human error. People have done something unwittingly, or they've done something that I find hard to believe they didn't know was dangerous. History demonstrates that if you take short cuts you run a greater risk of an accident."

All efforts to place responsibility for these recent incidents on the victims themselves are spurious. There is growing evidence that miners are increasingly being placed in dangerous circumstances within an already hazardous industry in the drive to push up profits.

A recent *Financial Times* article explained some of the conditions faced daily by miners in the UK who work in some of the most technologically advanced pits in the world.

"The heat is stifling, the noise almost unbearable, but it is at the face that the real money is made in mining—and where most accidents occur", the FT explained.

"In Britain's seven mechanised deep pits huge cutters move sideways along the exposed seam, depositing rock and coal alike on to a conveyor belt taking it back to the surface.

"The cutter is worked by two men, one operating it and the other monitoring its work, crouching in the cramped space by the hot face, eyes peeled for signs of fire. The faster they work, the more they get paid.

"Behind them the roof where the coal has been cut away is held up by hydraulic legs, known as chocks. Another team moves these forward after the cutter has gouged out the face, leaving the rock to collapse

behind. For up to eight hours a shift, the men are living in a temporary tunnel, up to 40C, 800m deep, dark and with thousands of tonnes of rock above them. The payback is they can earn as much as £40,000 a year.

“One miner at another pit told the FT that the industry’s bonus system, which rewards those directly at the coal face for cutting more coal, encourages risk-taking.”

The FT concluded; “Many miners would rather risk their lives for a good wage than follow less fortunate colleagues into unemployment or low-paid work. Many whose pits have closed have been forced on to the dole queue or have had to take piece-rate work in the call-centres and warehouses built on the reclaimed spoil heaps.”

Ken Capstick, former vice-president of the National Union of Mineworkers’ (NUM) Yorkshire region, acknowledged that the number of accidents was worrying. “We have a lot fewer miners in this country than we had years ago—some 4,000—and the number of fatalities is still far too high”, he said. “The question of safety in the mines has to be looked at again to stop more fatalities.”

Capstick’s remarks are reprehensible as the NUM is responsible for enabling a situation to develop where coal companies are able to play fast and loose with miners’ health and safety.

The present conditions of miners are the direct result of the betrayal and defeat of the 1984-1985 miners’ strike. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had set out mass pit closures with the aim of provoking a confrontation with the miners. It wanted to defeat a section of workers known for their militancy in order to intimidate the working class as a whole.

But Thatcher was able to achieve her objective only because of the betrayal of the Labour Party and the trade unions, who worked to isolate the miners. Their actions were in turn facilitated by the NUM and its then president, Arthur Scargill, who refused to conduct a struggle against the right wing Labour and trade union leaders.

The defeat of the miners saw the systematic driving down of the wages and conditions of the working class over the following two decades by Conservative and Labour governments alike. Today the NUM has been reduced to a paper membership of just 1,700.

On Friday, UK Coal appeared at Pontefract

Magistrates’ Court, alongside mining equipment firm Joy Mining Machinery Ltd to face a number of health and safety charges in relation to the death of Ian Cameron at Kellingley colliery.

Cameron, 46, died when equipment fell on him at the mine in October 2009.

UK Coal was accused of failing to ensure that powered roof supports at a coal face at the pit were “maintained in an efficient state, in efficient working order and in good repair.”

The company is also charged with exposing people to health and safety risks at the coal face and not ensuring the health and safety of its employees.

Joy Mining Machinery faces one charge of failing to ensure that people, including UK Coal, were provided with all necessary information about health and safety risks in relation to using the powered roof supports. The case was adjourned until October 24.

In a separate prosecution, UK Coal is due to be sentenced this month for breaching health and safety regulations in cases relating to the deaths of four miners at pits in the Midlands.

UK Coal has already pleaded guilty to safety failings that caused the death of four miners in separate incidents. Trevor Steeples was killed at Daw Mill Colliery, Warwickshire in June 2006. In August 2006, Paul Hunt was killed; in January 2007, Anthony Garrigan died at the same colliery. In November 2007, Paul Milner was killed at Welbeck colliery, Nottinghamshire. The company is being sentenced at Sheffield Crown court next month.



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