

# Near fatality in UK mine

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A miner was seriously injured last Friday in a roof collapse at the Unity drift mine, in the Vale of Neath, Wales. The mine is just eight miles from the Gleision Colliery in the Swansea Valley, where four men died last month.

Wayne Morris, a 48-year-old miner, had been working with a group of up to eight others approximately one mile underground when a roof collapsed, trapping him under the rubble.

A rescue team was called out at approximately 9:30 a.m., and Morris was brought to the surface by colleagues before being airlifted to a hospital in Cardiff with suspected crush injuries to his spine and pelvis.

The incident came one month to the day after Charles Breslin, 62, David Powell, 50, Garry Jenkins, 39, and Phillip Hill, 45, died at Gleision Colliery on September 15. They were killed when a retaining wall holding back underground water failed, flooding the tunnel where they were working 90 metres underground. A post-mortem found they had drowned.

Miners from Unity were among the rescuers who attended the Gleision tragedy. Both are private drift mines, where workers can walk into the pit. Gleision employed just a handful of workers. Unity, which is owned by Unity Power, employs more than 100 men.

Unity's safety chief Brian Thomas was at pains to point to the differences between the collieries. "We are essentially a drift mine but we are so different," he said. "This is a modern mine with modern technology and modern telemetry [electronic data measurement]. There is telemetry linking all parts of the mine."

According to reports, however, Morris is the second worker to have been injured at the mine this year, following an incident in which falling shale broke the leg of a miner in March.

It is more than 25 years since the defeat of the year-long miners' strike of 1984-1985, which saw mass pit closures and job losses, and the privatisation of the

little industry that remained. Over the last years, the price of coal has soared, making its extraction extremely profitable.

Gleision colliery mined anthracite coal, the price of which has risen by around a third over the past three years. The Unity mine opened in 2007, with plans to increase production to 1 million tonnes of coal annually.

Coal extraction is now so lucrative that new ventures are being planned. Western Carbons Ltd. is seeking planning permission to open a new mine, employing just eight people, at Penydarren, not far from Gleision.

The cost to miners' health and safety is not only being felt in drift mines, nor is it confined to South Wales. The number of mining deaths has risen from three between 2000 and 2006 to 17 from 2006 to today.

On September 27, 49-year-old Gerry Gibson was working 800 metres underground at the Kellingley colliery, operated by UK Coal, in North Yorkshire when a roof collapsed. Gibson was pronounced dead at the scene. An inquest heard he died of asphyxiation. His colleague, Phil Sheldon, was rescued with injuries to his leg.

Gibson was the fifth fatality in a British mine in one month, and the third at Kellingley in three years. Don Cook was killed at the pit after a roof collapse in 2008, and Ian Cameron was crushed to death by machinery in 2009. On November 30, 2010, 218 workers had to be evacuated after an underground methane gas explosion.

UK Coal has already pleaded guilty to safety failings that caused the deaths of four other miners at its pits in the Midlands. 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 Health and Safety Executive has said it will take

several months to conclude its investigation into the tragedy at Gleision. The stalling operation is part of a concerted effort to cover over the revival of Dickensian-style conditions in Britain's mines.

Just days before the latest incident, Conservative MP Cheryl Gillan, secretary of state for Wales, issued a ministerial statement on the Gleision disaster in which she pointed out that the "emergency services and mine rescue workers involved in the search and rescue operation carried out their work in incredibly difficult and dangerous circumstances. We are deeply indebted to them for their tireless determination and dedication."

Gillan continued, "The Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat provided full co-ordination in the immediate aftermath ensuring all parts of government with a role to play were fully appraised of the situation on the ground and of any actions that needed to be taken locally and centrally," before claiming that the government "will continue to do all it can to facilitate a full investigation."

But a report on the Gleision Mine disaster produced by Labour MP for Neath, Peter Hain, revealed that the rescue operation had been placed in grave jeopardy, as it was almost entirely dependent on the "goodwill" of neighbouring mines to provide crucial equipment, including pumps to clear the flooding.

In the wake of the privatisation of the coal industry, responsibility for emergency rescue operations passed to the private limited company, Mines Rescue Service Ltd. (MRSL). This receives no government funding and raises revenue through an 18 pence levy on mines for each tonne of coal extracted, and by offering training programmes.

In his report, Hain notes, "At a number of stages, in first the rescue attempt and second the investigation, there were disputes about paying bills and the nearby Walters Mining at Aberpergwm did in fact pay a £4,500 bill for diesel fuel for generators to drive the water pumps; had Walters not stepped in and volunteered to do so (without any certainty of getting their money back) the rescue attempt could have been seriously jeopardised."

In other words, the men would have been left trapped underground while it was decided who should foot the bill.

As it was, the rescue effort was "effectively being funded from the internal budgets of [US company]

Walter [Energy] and Unity [Mine]", Hain said.

The Labour MP has handed the report directly to the government. He says it is aimed at achieving a "fundamental change" in the way mining accidents are dealt with. But the proposals outlined are themselves pathetically inadequate and will do nothing to ameliorate the super-exploitation that is the root cause of rising fatalities.

Hain proposes only a government review of the lessons of the Gleision tragedy, that the MRSL be "properly resourced and provided with access to the Treasury reserve," and that "any attempt to water down or merge mines regulations [should]...be resisted".

Hain served as a minister in the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which insisted on "light-touch" regulation, if any, of the major banks and corporations. He served as secretary of state for Wales, under conditions in which Labour's big business agenda saw a record increase in inequality, creating the conditions where miners, and other workers, could be forced to work in unhealthy, and even dangerous conditions.



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