

New incident raises safety fears in UK mining

Julie Hyland
7 November 2011

News that three miners had to be rescued from the Aberpergwm drift mine in Glynneath, South Wales, on November 3 again highlights the callous disregard for health and safety in Britain's pits.

The three men, who have not been named, were trapped underground for up to an hour after a trench caved in at around 3:00 a.m.. Two suffered back injuries and were taken to hospital, while another was treated at the scene.

The incident occurred seven weeks to the day after four miners were killed at the Gleision colliery, another opencast mine, just a few miles from Aberpergwm. Phillip Hill, 45, Garry Jenkins, 39, David Powell, 50, and Charles Breslin, 62, died on September 15 when a wall collapsed, flooding the tunnel they were working in.

The Gleision tragedy has been portrayed as an unfortunate one-off, the product of a particularly small, shoestring operation. The aim is to cover over the revival of Dickensian-style exploitation in Britain's pits, facilitated by the betrayal and defeat of the 1984-1985 miners' strike and the subsequent mass closures and privatisation of the industry.

Particularly contemptible in this regard were the comments of Peter Hain, Labour MP for Neath, on the Aberpergwm incident. While claiming that "Any injury to any miner is cause for concern", Hain argued: "This latest incident is endemic in mining, which is a risky activity."

Events at Aberpergwm "cannot be compared to the tragic disaster which occurred in Gleision," he insisted. With an investigation barely underway into Thursday's incident, Hain asserted, "Aberpergwm is a modern and efficient mine. Its safety record is admirable and the mine is employing and recruiting more and more people every year."

Hain's description of the dangers of mining as "endemic" and "risky" amounts to a carte blanche for the mining companies, under conditions in which the numbers of fatalities and injuries in the industry have risen sharply.

Just three weeks before this latest incident, Wayne Morris, 48, was seriously injured in a roof collapse at the

Unity drift mine, barely eight miles from Gleision and one mile from Aberpergwm. In March, another miner was injured at the same pit when falling shale broke his leg. Nationally, the number of mining deaths has risen from 3 between 2000 and 2006 to 17 from 2006 to today.

Hain is aware of these figures. He was involved in a damning report on the Gleision mine disaster, which revealed that the rescue operation at the tiny opencast pit had been placed in grave jeopardy.

As in the rest of the coal industry, responsibility for emergency rescue operations is now carried out by a private company, Mines Rescue Service Ltd. (MRSL). This meant that the recovery of the four miners trapped at Gleision had been entirely dependent on the "goodwill" of neighbouring mines—including Aberpergwm—to provide crucial equipment such as pumps to clear the flooding, the report showed.

Hain made clear his priorities in his statement on Aberpergwm. He would be "very concerned" if the Gleision tragedy cast a dark shadow over mining in the area, where "400 people are employed in highly skilled jobs".

Drift mining is known to be hazardous, but rising coal prices have meant miners' safety counts for little in comparison to the profit margins of the private operators.

The expansion of opencast mining, especially in South Wales, was facilitated by successive governments, including the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in which Hain served.

An article by George Monbiot in the *Guardian*, October 9, 2007, detailed the final phase of the development at Ffos-y-fran, South Wales, an excavation of 1,000 acres of land to a depth of 600 feet, operated by the consortium Miller Argent. Ffos-y-fran was advanced as the final phase of the East Merthyr Reclamation Scheme, initiated following the defeat of the miners' strike. Its stated objective was to reclaim a large area of former industrial land to the east of Merthyr Tydfil through opencast mining.

The project was opposed by local residents. "But the

council, which is dominated by the Labour party, the Labour assembly member and the Welsh assembly have all helped the mining company to fight the objectors,” Monbiot wrote.

The local council allowed Miller Argent to fund the costs of its presentation to a public inquiry “out of the royalties that it would pay the council for the coal,” Monbiot explained. “There was no such support for the objectors: they had to fund their case at the inquiry out of their own pockets. They lost.”

Freedom of Information requests uncovered a letter sent in January 2004 by Stephen Timms, then minister for energy, to the first minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan. “My officials,” Timms revealed, “have had regular contact with Miller Argent.”

He wanted the company’s application “resolved with the minimum of further delay,” Monbiot quoted.

Another letter, sent in December 2004 by Timms’s replacement, repeated the arguments on behalf of Miller Argent.

The Ffos-y-fran venture was part of government plans to develop new coal-fired power stations. In 2006, the Blair government set up the Coal Forum, involving electricity and coal companies, to “lobby for the future of coal”. The same year, “British planning authorities considered twelve applications for new opencast coal mines. They rejected two of them and approved ten.”

“This is not the only support the government has given to coal mining,” Monbiot continued. Between 2000 and 2002, UK coal producers received £162 million in subsidies and a further £58.5 million in 2003 and 2004.

Conditions of superexploitation are not confined to South Wales and drift mining. On September 27, Gerry Gibson, 49, was killed in a roof collapse at Kellingley Colliery, operated by UK Coal, in North Yorkshire, England. Another miner, Philip Sheldon, was injured. Gibson was the third fatality at Kellingley in three years. On November 30, 2010, 218 workers had to be evacuated after an underground methane gas explosion.

UK Coal, the UK’s largest producer, is currently in court, where it has admitted Health and Safety failings relating to four deaths at its other collieries.

Trevor Steeples, 46, Paul Hunt, 45, and Anthony Garrigan, 42, were killed in separate incidents at Daw Mill Colliery, near Coventry, in 2006 and 2007. Paul Milner, 44, died after an incident at the now-closed Welbeck Colliery in Nottinghamshire in 2007.

Adjourning sentencing at Sheffield Crown Court, Mr. Justice MacDuff warned the victims’ families not to

expect heavy fines against the company.

UK Coal’s solicitor Mark Turner had told the court that the firm was “under intense economic pressure” after having reported losses of £124.6 million in 2010, on top of losses in 2009 and 2008.

In response, MacDuff said it would be in “nobody’s interest” to impose crippling fines on the firm. Justice for the men’s families, he said, had to be balanced with the need to ensure the financial viability of UK Coal, which “provided energy to the nation, employment within the nation and a valuable service all round.”

MacDuff said that when he decided the total of UK Coal’s liability, he would deduct UK Coal’s court costs “before determining the level of fines from what remained”.

In August, UK Coal reported its first profit in four years, as the result of a major overhaul. Higher coal prices contributed, as did a rise in production at Daw Mill from 2.7 million tonnes to 4.1 million tonnes in the first six months of the year.

Back in November, Jonson Cox, newly appointed chairman of the company, had set out his intention to reduce the cost of mining operations he said had spiralled from £44,000 per staff member to £61,000 over the last couple of years.

“The viability of UK Coal over the medium term depends on appropriately rewarding the equity capital required to finance the business. The board fully appreciates that investors deserve a far better return than they have experienced over recent years,” Jonson said.

Working practices have been targeted for speed-ups. In August, it was reported that UK Coal was in negotiations with six mining unions over changes to shift patterns. Many proposals have reportedly been agreed to by the unions, including the National Union of Mineworkers, reducing the “gaps” between shifts and making work patterns more “efficient”.

A UK Coal spokesman said, “We have had some very robust and challenging conversations with employees and unions over these matters. We are pleased that employees understand that there need to be changes and we are currently negotiating certain terms and conditions.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact