

China: Sixty killed in two mine disasters

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7 September 2012

Gas explosions at two Chinese mines last week further highlight the dangerous and exploitative conditions facing coal miners. The first explosion killed 45 and occurred on August 29 at the Xiaojiawan pit, just outside Panzhihua in Sichuan province. Another 15 workers lost their lives five days later in an explosion at the Gaokeng Coal Mine near Pingxiang city, Jiangxi province.

The disasters are just the latest in an almost endless series of industrial accidents caused by the drive for higher productivity and unsafe work practices. More than 50,000 miners are estimated to have died in accidents between 2001 and 2011.

The Xiaojiawan explosion occurred at 6 p.m., killing 45 and injuring 54 others. It was the worst single mining accident in the past three years. Although 108 survivors were rescued, reports point to ill-equipped emergency workers confronting extremely difficult and dangerous conditions.

According to authorities, the lack of basic equipment limited the number of emergency workers able to enter the disaster site. Rescue coordinators also reported that the risk of a roof collapse and high levels of carbon monoxide had impeded their efforts. At least 16 miners died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Rescue worker Tang Zhong told the *China Daily*: “The temperature in the pit is very high, and the air is not very good. The rescuers need respirators to stay longer.”

Xiaojiawan mine owners were later arrested by state authorities. The pit, which has an annual output of 90,000 metric tonnes, is owned by Zhengjin Industry and Trade Co., which gained a licence to operate in

December 2011.

The pit reportedly had a high density of gas but no gas sensor operating where the miners were drilling. The pit was also operating beyond its licensed capacity, with more miners underground than legally allowed.

The second explosion occurred at Gaokeng pit, a subsidiary of the state-owned Jiangxi Coal Group Corporation, on September 2. Fifteen miners were killed and another 11 injured from the blast. Twenty-three escaped on their own or with assistance. Six of the injured miners were still in a critical condition on September 4 with serious burns, brain trauma and inhalation injuries.

Mining in China remains one of the most dangerous professions globally, with conditions harkening back to the worst aspects of capitalist exploitation in 19th century Britain. According to the US Mine Rescue Association, which maintains a web site tracking Chinese mine disasters, 85 people were killed and 32 missing in August. Since the start of 2012, 359 miners have been killed and another 94 remain missing.

Responding to the latest disasters, State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS) spokesman Huang Yi admitted that 35 miners in China are killed for every 100 million tonnes of coal extracted—a death rate 10 times higher than in the US. Chinese government data shows that 1,973 miners were killed in 2011, a figure hailed by authorities because it represented a 19 percent decrease over the previous year.

Huang said small coal mines accounted for about 85 percent of China’s 12,000 operating mines but only produce one-third of national output. Two-thirds of all

deaths in the mining sector also occur at smaller pits, where owners attempt to cut operating costs by hiring untrained labour and paying wages according to tonnage.

SAWS has reported that it plans to shut 600 small coal mines in the near future. If this occurs, the purpose will only be to restructure the Chinese coal industry for the benefit of larger private and state companies. While demand for coal remains high—more than 3.5 billion metric tons of coal was extracted in 2011—it is nevertheless falling as the economy slows under the impact of the worsening global recession. By reducing the numbers of small mining companies, Chinese authorities hope to maintain the profits of the remainder.

The Gaokeng Coal Mine disaster involved a state-owned subsidiary, making clear that the dangerous conditions facing Chinese miners are not confined to small privately-owned operations but are widespread across the industry. The human carnage in the mining industry, in fact, is a particularly graphic expression of the brutal character of Chinese capitalism.

Limited official measures to address safety are purely cosmetic because of the dictates of the market to maximise profit and output in every industry. Under the pressure of the global economic slowdown to reduce costs and remain competitive, more deadly mining accidents are inevitable.



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