

A week of human carnage in China's mines

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Three deadly mine accidents in the past week have underscored the brutal character of China's transformation into a huge sweatshop for global capitalism.

Two of the three tragedies occurred at the same state-owned Babao Coal Mine, in the city of Baishan in the northeastern province of Jilin. The first gas explosion took place last Friday, killing 28 miners and injuring another 13.

The official Xinhua news agency reported that the provincial Communist Party secretary Wang Yulin and provincial governor Bayin Chaolu immediately went to the scene, supposedly to direct the rescue operation. It was a bid to quell local anger. The two officials cynically called for an investigation and for lessons to be drawn to prevent further deaths in the mining industry.

Even as the Babao mine was “under investigation,” another gas explosion occurred three days later, killing six more workers. Another 11 are missing. Speaking to the AFP news agency, a Babao mine official refused to explain why the mine had remained open after the first accident.

Photos published on the Inner Mongolia-based web site northnews.cn feature big signs at the mine, declaring “Safety First, Production Second,” alongside rows of the bodies recovered from the mine. Nearby were family members of the victims, poorly dressed and in tears.

The Tonghua Mining Group, which runs the mine, is a major state-owned company. Its web site states that the company employs 14,000 workers in 23 affiliated enterprises. Its annual capacity is 7.15 million tonnes of coal—mainly highly profitable coking coal for the steel industry. The company is one of the largest sources of taxation revenue for the Jilin provincial government.

Undoubtedly the drive for higher production was a key factor behind the gas explosions. In the case of the

second blast, the mine was either kept open or re-opened even though it was unsafe. The state media gave considerable coverage to the “rescue” of the workers after the first explosion, but was virtually silent about the second.

The third disaster involved a landslide last Friday that buried 83 workers at the Jiama copper mine in Tibet's Maizhokunggar county. The mine was operated by the state-owned China National Gold Group, the country's largest gold mining group, which is listed on the Hong Kong stock market.

The workers were reportedly asleep in their tents when they were buried by a mass of mud, rocks and debris, three kilometres wide and 30 metres deep. Snow, freezing temperatures and high altitude sickness hampered the rescue effort. As of April 2, 36 miners have been confirmed dead and the other 47 are missing, believed dead.

In a show of concern, President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, all personally instructed officials to “spare no efforts” to rescue workers. The issue is extremely sensitive as the push to explore Tibet's vast resources, including deposits of copper, chromium, bauxite and other minerals, is fuelling social and ethnic tensions.

The regional authorities sent 3,000 soldiers to the area, nominally to rescue workers, but also to ensure there were no protests. The disaster was near the hometown of the medieval Tibetan king, Songzain Gambo, who has been worshipped as deity for centuries.

The state media has given no official explanation for the sudden landslide, saying only that it was a “natural disaster.”

An instruction, thought to be leaked from the Chinese regime's propaganda department, ordered media outlets to “provide correct guidance to public opinion, not to report and speculate [on] related sensitive

subjects.” It specified: “No journalist to be sent to the region for reporting or interviewing.”

Many Internet bloggers in the region suggested that the landslide was likely caused by the devastation of the area’s environment by uncontrolled and widespread mining activity. Larger companies like the China Gold Group employ up to 10,000 miners in the region, but there are also many smaller private mines hiring hundreds of workers.

One blogger wrote that travelling along the Sichuan-Tibet freeway, there were countless mines, large and small. The road had been badly damaged by the hundreds of huge 80-tonne trucks carrying ore out of the region each day.

China’s State Administration of Work Safety often claims that small illegal mines are the greatest cause of mining deaths. But each of the latest disasters was in a large enterprise directly owned and operated by the national government, making clear that its management is just as ruthless in putting profit before the lives of workers.

In January, three workers lost their lives at another copper mine in Fujian province, owned by the Zijin Mining Group, China’s third largest gold producer. On March 12, another 25 workers were killed in a mine operated by the major former state-owned Shuicheng Mining Group in Guizhou province. This followed the group’s ambitious plan to be listed on the share markets and triple output to 30 million tonnes of coal a year by 2015.

Last year, according to official figures, 1,384 people died in mining accidents in China and, in 2011, 1,973 were killed. Because of the widespread practice of covering up the full extent of mine disasters, the actual death tolls could be higher.

The new Chinese government of President Xi and Premier Li has already indicated that it will accelerate pro-market restructuring. This is likely to escalate mining disasters as large state-owned companies are subordinated more directly to share markets and the profit demands of private investors.



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