

At least 40 killed in two coal mine explosions in China

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At least 40 miners have been killed and dozens injured in two coal mining accidents that occurred within 24 hours of each other in the southern Chinese provinces of Guizhou and Sichuan.

The latest incidents, which occurred last Friday and Saturday, come just over a month after what the *World Socialist Web Site* described as “a week of human carnage in China’s mines.” The latest disasters underscore the continued absence of basic safety protections for Chinese mining workers amid the relentless drive by the government and companies for higher profit and output.

Last Friday, an explosion in the Dashan coal mine in Pingba county, Guizhou province, killed 12 miners. Two were injured, one of whom suffered burns to 95 percent of his body. The remaining survivor was farther away from the blast. He later described his horrifying experience: “I pinched my nose, lay on my stomach and crawled forward in the darkness. There was no light. I could not see or hear anybody. I kept a cool head, and when I heard the sound of an air extractor coming from above, I climbed to that air outlet.”

Local authorities reported that the owner initially attempted to cover up the accident, because the company was operating in an “unauthorised” coal zone.

The following day, at around 2 p.m., there was an explosion in Taozigou coal mine in Luzhou, Sichuan province. It occurred while 108 miners were working underground. The blast claimed the lives of 28 workers and injured 18 others. Five are in “critical condition” and another three “remain in life-threatening” condition, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

One of the Taozigou survivors said: “It was a strong [blast] force. I heard a huge boom (from my back). I then saw a fire.”

The authorities have initiated their usual strategy for dealing with industrial disasters: feigning indignation, focusing on individual mines, and issuing empty promises that further accidents will be prevented.

Yang Dongliang, head of the State Administration of Work Safety, declared: “We should draw lessons from the coal mine accident and will launch an investigation into safety levels to ensure people are not at risk of harm at work and to prevent any future similar incidents.” Yang added that all the licenses of the mine must be revoked and the site shut down permanently. The administration has also suspended all the coal mines in Sichuan province for a “comprehensive overhaul and thorough checks.” According to *Bloomberg*, Sichuan as a whole accounts for only 0.6 percent of Chinese coal production.

The government’s regulation of the mining industry has heightened the dangers confronting mine workers. Under the guise of promoting greater safety, the government last year ordered the closure of all small coal mines with output less than 90,000 tonnes a year in Sichuan province. The privately-owned Taozigou mine responded by ramping up production in order to avoid closure, with the demanded speed ups producing a more dangerous work environment. At the same time, the company’s official status as a leading “economic contributor” because of its tax contribution to county authorities saw inspectors turn a blind eye to safety issues.

A former mine manager, Liu Shenjung, told *21st Century Business Herald* that he was fired last September after he had warned about high gas levels in the mine. But just four days before the blast, the head of Sichuan provincial industrial safety inspector inspected Taozigou, and found no violation of safety standards.

The State Coal Inspection Administration director Fu Jianhua has since admitted that initial investigations into the explosion found that the likely cause was high gas density generated by coal extraction conducted in several “unauthorised” tunnels without proper ventilation systems. Workers had been deployed to each tunnel simultaneously to increase output.

The Chinese authorities are boasting that the loss of life in the country’s mines had been lowered to 1,300 last year, from more than 2,600 in 2009.

The government’s pride in the four-figure death toll underscores its utter contempt for the working class and the authorities’ claimed safety improvements lack credibility. A US-based Association for Asia Research study in 2006 noted: “The low price tag placed on human life made it easy for owners to reach private deals with the families of the deceased miners to remain quiet, allowing for the under- and non-reporting of deaths.” Fines for industrial accidents imposed by the government, the report explained, only served to create “significant incentives for mine owners to reach private deals with miners’ families so as to avoid fines, further distorting death tolls.”

With slowing Chinese economic growth, demand for energy, especially coal, is declining. The declining price of coal imports from Australia and Indonesia has placed further pressure on Chinese producers.

The domestic coal price is now at its lowest level since 2009. Total power generation is growing much more slowly than the economy as a whole, recording just 2.9 percent annualised growth in the first quarter of this year. “Power plants are shopping around for bargains and are slow to put in orders,” one coal mine owner in China’s Inner Mongolia told Reuters. “Prices have fallen close to production costs and some higher-cost mines are already in the red.”

The merciless competition to stay profitable is driving owners, including large state-owned companies, to cut corners, ramp up production, and endanger the lives and well being of mine workers.



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