

Two miners killed in Australian copper mine

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On Monday, two workers were killed at the Copper Mines of Tasmania (CMT) Mount Lyell copper mine in Queenstown, western Tasmania. Craig Gleeson, 45, and Alistair Lucas, 25, both fathers of young families, plunged around 35 metres to their deaths in the mine's main shaft.

According to initial reports, they had been standing on a platform while performing maintenance work some 600 metres underground. Gleeson died instantly and Lucas died on the way to hospital.

CMT, whose Mount Lyell operation employs 300 people, is a subsidiary of Sterlite, an Indian copper smelting business that has mining interests across four continents. While the actual mining is done by contractors, CMT directly employs the maintenance crews.

Every Monday, the crews carry out essential work in the main shaft, which houses ore skips and electricity and air conduits. The skips are sometimes positioned together for maintenance, with workers walking between them on planks.

The exact cause of the fatal incident has not been identified. Investigations by a coroner and the Tasmanian state government's Workplace Standards agency are said to be focusing on whether the men were wearing safety harnesses, and whether the harnesses supplied were adequate.

CMT's safety rules reportedly required harnesses to be worn when working at heights. However, it is not uncommon throughout industry for corporate demands to minimise production holdups to pressure workers into leaving aside safety gear that restricts rapid completion of tasks.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union state secretary John Short immediately swung into damage control, declaring "mining is an intrinsically, I suppose dangerous profession and obviously everyone tried to make sure it's as safe as possible." In reality, in the

drive to maximise profits, the mining companies have undermined safety all down the line.

The number of fatalities across the Australian mining sector now stands at four in just three weeks and nine during 2013. This year is likely to be the worst since 2009, when 10 mine workers died. Mining, which employs less than 5 percent of the country's workforce, remains among the top six sectors responsible for workplace deaths.

On the night of December 4, a female contract worker employed by Tesa Mining was crushed to death at the GlencoreXstrata open cut mine in the New South Wales (NSW) Hunter Valley when the light Toyota land cruiser she was driving collided with a fully laden 400-tonne dump truck. The cruiser was so badly crushed it took four hours for rescuers to remove her body. Aged 38, she was a trainee employed by the Skilled Group and had only worked on the site since February.

Also on December 4, a contract employee was killed while working on the tailings discharge line at Newcrest's Telfer gold and copper mine in northern Western Australia (WA). It was the second mining death in WA this year and the fifth since April 2010.

In August, Kurt Williams, a young contract electrician, was crushed to death at Fortescue Metal's Christmas Creek mine in WA's Pilbara region. His death highlights the conditions facing the growing numbers of contract workers. Employed by Crushing Services International (CSI), he was doing maintenance on heavy live equipment late at night, entirely on his own. While the Electrical Trade Union claimed it raised concerns with CSI over Williams's working conditions, it failed to take any action to correct them.

Just two months later, a truck driver at the same mine had to have his leg amputated after a collision with another haulage vehicle.

GlencoreXstrata, Newcrest and Fortescue have all

recently imposed savage cost-cutting, shedding of hundreds of jobs while pushing for increasing levels of productivity—a recipe for the further undermining of safety.

Just weeks before the fatality at the Telfer site, Newcrest announced it would cut more jobs, on top of an unspecified number targeted in June. Over 100 contractors' jobs were axed at Fortescue's Christmas Creek mine in July. Since late 2012, Glencore has cut over 600 jobs in NSW and Queensland, including almost 50 from the Ravensworth mine.

Governments at both federal and state levels, Liberal and Labor alike, along with the trade unions, are deeply implicated in creating the conditions for the deaths and accidents. Concerned only about protecting multi-million dollar annual profits and mining royalties, they have backed decades of restructuring at the expense of jobs, conditions and safety.

The unions have worked to prevent any struggles against job cuts, the incessant driving up of productivity, the ever-greater use of contractors and fly-in fly-out (FIFO) crews, and the introduction of extended shifts and around the clock working that causes high levels of fatigue.

Two of the recent four fatalities involved contract workers. Many contract workers are inadequately trained and receive poor induction before coming onto sites. The 2012-13 Queensland Mines and Quarry Safety Report found that 90 percent of coal mining industry fatalities over the past decade involved a contract worker.

A Safety Institute of Australia study analysing 52 mining deaths in WA's resources sector from 2000 to 2012 revealed that 49 percent of the fatalities involved workers in their first year at mine sites or fulfilling new roles, while 44 percent involved supervisors in their first year on the job.

The study also pointed to the impact of fatigue. It showed that clusters of deaths and accidents occurred near the end of day shift, five hours into both day and night shifts, and at 3 a.m. More than half the incidents involved workers on the commonly used FIFO two-on one-off roster.

There also continues to be hundreds of life-threatening incidents, many of which could have resulted in deaths. According to the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, in March

alone there were 150 "serious accidents and high potential incidents" in the state's mines, involving heavy equipment falls, rock crashes, electrocutions and heavy vehicle collisions.



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