

Australia: Two miners crushed to death in underground wall collapse

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The Jim Comerford Memorial Wall in the Australian regional town of Cessnock, 150 kilometres north of Sydney, records the names of more than 1,800 mine workers killed since coal mining began in the Hunter Valley region in 1801. The oldest to die was 73, the youngest was just 11 years old.

Tragically, two more names have been added to the grim tally. Phillip Grant, 35, from Metford and Jamie Mitchell, 49, from Aberdare were crushed to death just after 9 pm on April 15 at the underground Austar Coal Mine in Paxton, near Cessnock. Mitchell was a father of five. Grant had a seven-year-old boy.

The mine, which employs 409 workers, including contractors, has been operated since 2005 by Yancoal Australia. Its largest shareholder is Chinese mining giant Yanzhou Coal, which also has operations in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia.

Since the deaths, the mine has been under a shutdown order while the New South Wales state Department of Resources and Energy and police investigate the cause of the collapse. It is unclear when it will re-open.

The two men were cutting a tunnel 500 metres underground in a development area of the mine when a catastrophic rock burst, or “pressure bump,” caused a section of wall around 15 metres long and several metres high to collapse. Tonnes of coal totally buried the continuous miner that the men were operating.

Two other workers, Brent Nolan and Chad Law, who were on the opposite side of the continuous miner, narrowly escaped serious injury. Despite the danger, Nolan and Law immediately attempted to stabilise the area and, with other miners, tried without success to assist the trapped workers.

Grant and Mitchell probably died instantly. Their bodies could not be recovered until April 17, adding to the stress of family, friends and the entire local mining

community. The Austar miners conducted a continuous vigil outside the mine for around 44 hours until the bodies were brought to the surface.

Austar uses a mining technique known as longwall top-coal caving, a highly-automated method that allows the machinery to retrieve up to 50 percent more premium semi-hard coking coal from a seam.

Longwall mining is favoured by companies because it can extract up to five tonnes of coal a minute from a seam. Over the past 60 years, however, it has been responsible for more deaths and injuries across the region’s coalfields than any other mining method.

Cutting access to new areas in preparation for longwall mining is considered to be one of the most high risk operations. The area of the new tunnel above and directly behind the operation cannot be immediately secured with rock bolts. At the same time, the geology of the area being rapidly cut through is not accurately known.

Just three years ago, in 2011, a 52-year-old miner Peter Jones was crushed to death at the nearby Chain Valley Bay underground colliery when a pressure bump caused a massive rock fall during the preparation of a new tunnel.

Following the Austar deaths, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) immediately went into damage control. Northern District president Peter Jordan declared that the union was not aware of any safety concerns at the mine. He said there had “certainly been some faults here and there, but my understanding is that that’s been addressed and the mine has continued to work in a reasonably safe manner.”

However, Professor of Engineering Garry Willgoose at the University of Newcastle told the media: “I am told by people who are familiar with that mine that this

(catastrophic rock burst) has happened before.” In 2008 there was another serious safety incident at Austar, in which a worker lost his arm in a continuous mining machine. The company was fined \$105,000.

Speaking on behalf of the CFMEU, Jordan called for a review of mining practices. “All parties, the employees, union, the government, and the regulators need to do more work to ensure the industry becomes safer,” he said. “We can’t say it’s safe until we stop killing workers.” At the same time, Jordan declared: “I don’t criticise any individual party.”

Calls for a review have become a ritual response to fatalities, not only in mining, but across all industries. Such appeals are designed to take the heat out of the situation and ensure that workers do not take matters into their own hands. Any official inquiry invariably accommodates to the overriding preoccupation of mining companies, which is not the safety of workers, but their multi-million dollar annual profits.

The unions above all seek to cover up their own role in undermining mine safety. Under the banner of boosting “international competitiveness,” they have suppressed any struggle by workers against the incessant drive for productivity, the ever-greater use of contractors and the introduction of extended shifts and around the clock working. These have all contributed to the erosion of safety standards across the mining sector.

Governments, state and federal, have also acted to deregulate safety, including by cutting the number of mine safety inspectors. At the same time, they have backed employers’ workplace restructuring at the expense of safety, working conditions and jobs to boost coal company profits and in turn increase mining royalties.

There have now been five coal mining deaths in the Hunter Valley region in the past five months, including a female contract worker who was crushed to death at the Glencore Xstrata open cut mine last December. The land cruiser she was driving collided with a fully-laden 400-tonne dump truck. A Glencore Xstrata spokesperson then claimed: “The company’s primary concern is for the safety and welfare of its employees.” At the time, Jordan also called for “an investigation into the industry’s transport rules.”

Now, under conditions of falling coal prices and declining demand in Asia and China, the major coal companies are launching a new round of cost cutting

and restructuring that will further undermine safety standards and lead to even more deaths and injuries.



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