

Australian mining fatalities on the rise

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Deaths in Australia's mining industry are rising as major companies eliminate jobs, slash costs and boost output in a drive to offset plunging commodity prices and maintain profits. Amid these conditions, safety is being further eroded in one of the country's most dangerous industries.

During 2013-14, there were 17 fatalities across the mining sector nationally, including in coal, iron ore, copper and gold. The toll is the third worst in 15 years. In the six months to June this year, a mine worker was killed on average every 15 days.

The deaths occurred in the states of New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia, as well as the Northern Territory. In NSW, which hosts major coal projects, five miners were killed in eight months.

Media reports of the rising toll sent the NSW Liberal Party government into damage control. Resources and Energy Minister Anthony Roberts confirmed he had written to the Mine Safety Advisory Council to seek "a deeper, holistic examination of current circumstances." He made an oblique reference to the sharp downturn in mining, saying he "was concerned that an apparent increase in serious incidents was occurring at the same time as external factors were affecting the industry."

That Roberts raised any concern at all is significant. The NSW government, like its counterparts in other resource-rich states, rarely makes even the mildest criticism of the rapacious activity of the mining companies that provide huge royalties.

On the contrary, successive Liberal and Labor governments, at both federal and state levels, have deregulated safety, including by cutting the numbers of mine safety inspectors. At the same time, they have unhesitatingly backed employers' workplace restructuring at the expense of safety, working conditions and jobs, in order to boost company profits and hence royalties.

Robert's reference to "external factors affecting the industry" points to the ongoing plunge in export prices, driven by falling demand in Asia, and especially China, as economic growth there and globally continues to stall.

The price of Australian thermal coal for delivery next month hit a 5-year low of \$62 per tonne. Business analysts now expect price falls to extend into 2015 and predict that prices could fall to \$55 a tonne—a level not seen since 2008-2009.

Iron ore prices have dropped more than 40 percent this year to below \$US80 a tonne, the lowest since 2009. Copper prices have fluctuated between \$7,500 and \$8,500 per tonne over the past 18 months, well down on the 2010-2011 level of \$10,000 per tonne. Gold for December delivery was down \$27, or 2.3 percent, at \$1,171.60 a troy ounce—the lowest settlement price since July 2010.

In response, major mine operators have imposed sweeping job cuts while fighting to maintain production levels. Last month, Michael Roche of the Queensland Resources Council admitted that "coal companies have been able to achieve record production with, say, about 9,000 fewer workers."

Reduced manning levels inevitably lead to speed-up and cutting of corners on safety. Mine workers are placed under increasing pressure to maintain output or rush to complete production-related maintenance.

After jobs were axed at Anglo-American's Grasree underground coal mine in Queensland in 2012, for example, the company's web site announced a new operational plan to substantially increase production. It stated that "every mine employee knew what work was required of them" and ominously declared that workers "were accountable for delivering to plan."

The jobs cuts took place after three miners narrowly escaped death at Grasree in 2011. An on-site storage dam broke its banks, allowing 36 megalitres of water to

rush into the mine, forcing the men to climb mining equipment to avoid drowning. In May this year, electrician Paul McGuire, 34, died at the mine when he was overcome by noxious gases.

Coal mining deaths in NSW during 2013-14 include a female contract worker crushed to death at Glencore's Ravensworth open-cut coalmine, two men killed in a rock fall at Astar Coal's underground mine and a rigger crushed while working on the Boggabri Coal expansion.

Nationally there has been a shocking spate of deaths in copper and gold mines. Two workers were killed in a fall at the Mount Lyell copper mine in Tasmania, another died after being sucked into a pipe at CSA Copper, NSW and one worker was killed in a fall at MIM Copper in Queensland.

It is likely that the two workers killed at Mount Lyell removed safety harnesses that would have slowed down their movements as they worked to complete vital regular maintenance on a section of the mine.

In gold mining, one worker was killed at the Harlequin Gold Mine in Western Australia (WA), another was crushed to death at the Telfer gold mine, also in WA, and a worker died in a "mud-rush" at Tasmania's Mount Lyell Gold Mine.

The NSW government has now announced a "review" of mine safety. Such reviews are ritual responses to fatalities, not only in mining, but across all industries. They are designed to take the heat out of the situation and create the conditions to absolve the mining companies of all responsibility.

The results of such inquiries invariably accommodate to the overriding preoccupation of mining companies, which is not the safety of workers, but their multi-billion dollar profits.

Undoubtedly, the mining unions will fall in behind the government's inquiry as a means of ensuring that workers do not take matters into their own hands, and to prevent any genuine examination of the unions' role in undercutting mine safety. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union already called for such a "review" after the two deaths in April at the Astar Coal Mine.

Under the banner of boosting "international competitiveness," the unions have for decades relentlessly suppressed any struggle by workers against the incessant drive for higher productivity, the ever-

greater use of contractors and the introduction of extended shifts and around-the-clock working. These processes have all contributed to the erosion of safety standards, causing deaths and injuries.



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