

Dozens killed in fatal methane blast at east Ukraine coal mine

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Thirty-two coal miners were killed, another is missing and more than a dozen hospitalised with injuries, following a suspected methane gas blast Wednesday at the privately-owned Zasyadko coal mine located near the separatist-held city of Donetsk. Eight years ago, the same mine experienced Ukraine's worst ever mining disaster.

In a country which is virtually bankrupt and is only being kept afloat by International Monetary Fund loans, miners at Zasyadko have continued to work despite being near the frontline of a warzone.

In January, 500 miners were trapped underground at Zasyadko after artillery fired by Ukrainian armed forces hit the electricity station that supplies the pit with power. A union official told a Ukrainian TV channel there had been no fighting in the area in recent days.

At least 230 workers were in the shaft when the explosion occurred around 3:20GMT local time. During the afternoon, authorities in Donetsk announced that over 198 people had been able to escape from the mine.

While the number of fatalities has yet to be confirmed, Ukrainian parliament speaker Volodymyr Hroisman announced shortly after the blast that 32 miners had been killed. Other sources initially reported that as many as 77 miners had died in the blast.

As a rescue operation was put into place, the head of the Kievsky district in Donetsk, Ivan Prikhodko, said no communication could be established with the miners trapped underground. The Emergency Ministry and the Independent miners' trade union said there were either 73 or 207 people underground at the time. In the afternoon, a trade union official told journalists that 47 miners remained missing inside the mine.

The sister of missing miner Alexei Novoselsky was

one of about 30 relatives desperate for information about their loved ones. She pleaded in tears to a rescue worker at the entrance to the mine, "Tell me, are there survivors? Why are you concealing the truth?"

Most reports said a build-up of methane gas which ignited was the probable cause of the blast. The head of the Donetsk People's Republic emergency services Aleksey Kostrubitsky told the media, "Presumably, it was a methane explosion."

Zasyadko, a deep mine with levels of methane well-known to be particularly hazardous, is infamous as the location of many disasters. Since 1999, more than 240 miners have lost their lives in the pit at Zasyadko.

Following a methane explosion at a mine, it is critical that workers are rescued as quickly as possible. A medical worker on the scene who was asked about the chance of survival for those trapped in the shaft said, "It's getting smaller and smaller all the time, because of the methane, the hot air, burns to the airways."

The BBC reported the comments of a welder at the mine who said, "I've been down the pit for 23 years, and this is the fourth explosion that I can recall. If they didn't get them out straight away, then later they will only retrieve bodies. An explosion is a terrible thing."

The Zasyadko mine is the largest in Ukraine, employing 10,000 people and producing up to 10,000 tons of coal per day. In 2013, it produced 1.4 million tonnes of coal. The mine is part-owned by Yukhym Zvyahilsky, once an acting prime minister of Ukraine and now an MP. He is described by the BBC as "a local leader with money and influence." During the final years of the Soviet era, from 1979 through 1992, Zvyahilsky was a director of the Zasyadko mine.

The mine plays a critical role in supplying the industrial operations of Ukrainian oligarchs, under conditions in which the civil war has led to a fall in

total coal production. Due to disruption of operations, national coal production fell by 22 percent in 2014 to 65 million tonnes. By the end of 2014, Zasyadko was still supplying coal to coke and chemical works in the Donetsk region owned by Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's wealthiest oligarch. Akhmetov is the 47th richest man in the world, worth an estimated \$15.4 billion. (See: Oligarchs to the fore once again in Ukraine)

In November 2007, 101 miners were killed at Zasyadko in Ukraine's worst ever pit disaster. The workers were killed after the mine filled with methane gas that then exploded. The tragedy was one of three incidents that year which resulted in fatalities.

Zasyadko opened in 1958 and was never properly modernised. Following the restoration of capitalism in Ukraine after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the vast majority of mines were left in a decrepit and unsafe condition. In the 20 years prior to 2007, just 10 out of approximately 200 pits were modernised. The majority of mines are completely run-down, with many not even deploying sensors to warn of the danger of gas.

From 1991 to 2002, pit tragedies claimed the lives of 435 miners in Ukraine, many due to explosions and fires. In March 2000, a methane gas explosion in the Barakova mine killed more than 80 miners. By 2006, according to the State Committee on Industrial Safety and Labour Protection, 6,751 industrial accidents were recorded in coalmining enterprises, with 168 of them resulting in a fatality.

In short, the Zasyadko mine, among many others in the country, is a death trap. The hundreds of miners' lives taken at the pit in just the last 15 years are an indictment of Ukraine's capitalist coal industry. A cemetery built next to the mine holds the graves of many miners. Reuters quoted the head of security at the mine who said, "When there's an accident, we bury them all here. Coal is a costly business."

The human cost of mining in Ukraine is indeed staggering. By 2007, it was estimated that for every million tonnes of coal produced in Ukraine, five miners died and 350 were injured. On average, one miner died underground each day.

The deaths at Zasyadko reveal yet again the bloody price that workers living in the former Soviet Union are paying for the restoration of capitalism—a system that sacrifices the safety of workers at the altar of profits.

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