

Dozens of Chinese miners killed in three accidents

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At least 37 miners have been killed in China in recent mine explosions and cave-ins, which are a regular occurrence in a country notorious for the lack of adequate safety measures.

The most recent accident occurred at a gypsum mine in Shandong Province when it collapsed on December 25, killing one miner and trapping 17 underground. Rescuers are trying to reach the miners who are trapped in two separate sections of the mine but are being hampered by the instability of the tunnels and falling rocks. The mine owner committed suicide on Sunday.

On December 16, an explosion at a small, privately-owned coal mine in Hegang, Heilongjiang Province, in northeast China trapped 52 workers. While 33 were rescued, the rescue team announced the next day that the remaining miners were likely dead due to lethal levels of carbon monoxide and a fire with temperatures as high as 1,000 degrees Celsius.

The owner of the mine was subsequently arrested. Rather than address the serious safety issues that result in thousands of deaths annually in China's mining industry, the owners of companies or local government figures are often used as scapegoats for widespread, unsafe practices. Authorities issue perfunctory promises of changes to safety measures but little is actually done.

A third tragedy took place on December 17 at a coal mine in Huludao, Liaoning Province. Seventeen workers were killed after a fire broke out—13 immediately and the other four in hospital. The State Administration of Work and Safety reported that the fire began as a result of sparks thrown off by a welder while other reports suggested faulty wiring was the cause.

China's coal mining industry is one of the most dangerous in the world. The government reported that 931 people were killed in mine accidents last year,

down from almost 7,000 in 2002. However, the numbers are grossly understated. "Deaths of three or five wouldn't be considered an issue here," said a coal miner, surnamed Ma, in an interview with the *New York Times*. "No one would report them. The owner will give some money to the family and call it a day."

The city of Hegang is surrounded by coal mines, many of which are operated by the state-owned Longmay Group, which has a poor safety history. Last month, 22 coal miners were killed in a fire at a Longmay mine located in Jixi, 150 miles from Hegang. The company waited nine hours before reporting the disaster. In 2009, 108 miners were killed at another of their mines.

The callous disregard for the safety of miners is a product of the drive to cut production costs and boost profits. The coal industry in particular is under pressure from falling demand and prices which have dropped to a 12-year low of \$38 per tonne.

Many state-owned mines are being privatized and layoffs are increasing. Longmay announced in September that it would lay off 100,000 workers. "We are busy planning the reform of the company, and we are not ready to give information to the public," the company stated earlier this month.

So far, only a few hundred miners at Longmay, mostly older workers, have lost their jobs. Workers told the *New York Times* that the number of safety inspectors has also been slashed, resulting in a curtailment of safety standards.

Workers are increasingly frustrated as they struggle to make ends meet. Cui, a former miner at Longmay, commented: "In the 90s, everyone was poor. Now the rich are too rich, and the poor are too poor. Because of the layoffs, everyone is worried. No one has a way to live outside the mines. With the New Year holidays

coming, there will be chaos in Hegang.”

As economic conditions continue to deteriorate in China, the government is trying to avoid mass layoffs, knowing the result will be protests and social unrest. However, mass sackings are being planned beyond those in the coal industry. The Wuhan Iron and Steel Group—one of China’s largest steel mills—announced last week that it would lay off 11,000 workers.

In the first eleven months of this year, there were 2,354 strikes and protests compared to 1,207 over the same period last year, according to the China Labor Bulletin. Last month, 301 strikes occurred, higher than in January when the number of monthly protests often reaches their peak before the Lunar New Year holiday. Most strikers were demanding their employers pay their wages.

Protests have already taken place in Hegang. In April, workers marched in the city to protest against delayed wage payments. In October, workers were locked in Longmay mines to prevent them from taking part in protests. Others have been arrested and threatened with jail terms for discussing demonstrating online. “Most who are still here are like me, they don’t have a way out,” said one unidentified worker. “If the company would pay our salaries on time and in full, the workers would love to work.”

Heavy industry, covering the coal, iron, and steel sectors have been particularly hit by the economic downturn. The government has implemented economic restructuring and privatization, but faced resistance from sections of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Exemplified by the now-jailed Zhou Yongkang, a layer of the party leadership favored turning large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) into “national champions.”

The so-called anti-corruption campaign launched by President Xi Jinping is aimed at suppressing opposition to the privatization agenda. Deng Qilin, for example, was chairman of Wuhan Iron and Steel until June 2015. He was accused of “disciplinary violations”—a euphemism for corruption—in August.

The mine disasters are just a graphic example of the way in which the health and safety of workers are sacrificed for profit. In total, 68,061 Chinese workers were killed in workplace accidents in 2014.

Unsafe working conditions are paralleled by disasters in working class neighborhoods. In August, more than 140 people were killed by a massive explosion in the

city of Tianjin caused by dangerous chemicals illegally stored in a warehouse close to residential areas. Last week, a huge landslide caused by the collapse of a mountain of industrial waste engulfed areas of Shenzhen. Dozens of people are still missing, feared dead.



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