Australia: Northern Territory worker killed in preventable open-cut mine disaster

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24 September 2019

The body of 59-year-old mine worker, Craig Butler, was recovered from underneath 48,000 tonnes of soil on September 4, nearly a fortnight after a pit wall collapsed on him at the Manganese Bootu Creek mine in the Northern Territory.

The disaster occurred when a soil wall collapsed near where Butler, a husband and father of two daughters, had been working. The mine site closed briefly after the accident, but resumed much of its operations soon after, despite an ongoing excavation of the area where the accident occurred.

The tragedy followed previous attempts by concerned workers to have the site investigated. Reports by workers revealed that other wall slips had begun occurring in 2018. While specific details on the incident have yet to be publicly released, Primary Industry and Resources Minister Paul Kirby admitted that the Northern Territory (NT) government had been told about earlier safety problems at the site. “We are aware of previous incidents that have taken place, some of those have been notified to my department,” he stated.

Former Queensland Commissioner for Mine Safety Stuart Bell explained that the incident ought not to have happened. “There should be a zone in front of that wall that people are not allowed to be [in]—if they have to be there, the wall needs to be supported in some way so it won’t fall over,” he said, adding: “There’s also radar technology that scans the walls of the pit all the time.”

Why these warnings were not heeded has not been explained. The Singaporean-based parent company OM Holdings issued condolences through the media and made offers of counselling for traumatised and grief-stricken employees.

The mine, located 700 kilometres from the NT capital of Darwin, has had other issues in the past. It previously operated from 2006 to 2015 before being placed in administration due to falling prices. In 2013, mine operators were fined $150,000 in the Darwin Magistrates’ Court for one count of desecration to, and one count of damaging, an Aboriginal sacred site known as the ‘Two Women Sitting Down.’

The 140 workers that lost their jobs as a result of the mine’s 2015 closure had to wait until 185,000 tonnes of stockpiled ore was sold in 2016 to receive their payouts and employee entitlements. The site was reopened in 2017 and resumed full production last year.

After viewing photographs of the mine, many workers expressed their grief and anger online. One worker wrote: “That’s ridiculous how steep those walls are, no catch benches at all, let alone a stand-off windrow at the bottom, when will we see management charged over negligence as a result of fatalities in mining or any business that take shortcuts and safety over $$$$$.”

Another stated: “That’s not safe at all, walls that steep should have been pushed out further away from the immediate working area and much larger benches cut into the faces. Definitely not safe!!”

Lack of regulation and oversight of working conditions is rife in Northern Territory mines and workplaces, and workers there are three times more likely to die on site than the national average. The death comes just months after two men died within weeks of each other in Darwin. Both were horrifically crushed by heavy equipment.

Ken Lowth, an NT organiser for the Construction, Forestry, Mining, Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU), has claimed the union had no knowledge of prior reports at the Manganese Bootu Creek site.

Responding to the previous reports by workers, he said, “If that’s the case we want to know what the

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company's done, and what the NT WorkSafe has done to make that right." Lowth added that he would have an "urgent meeting with NT WorkSafe once its investigation at the site was complete."

WorkSafe, a corporation and state authority, is used to cover-up and whitewash such incidents and invariably fails to bring those responsible to account.

The CFMMEU's response to the latest incident in the Northern Territory has been to call for an industry "reset," in line with similar recent announcements in Queensland. This approach is aimed at stifling workers' anger and channelling opposition into controllable channels.

In Queensland, six mine workers have died in the past year, the highest number recorded since 1997. Two sham "independent reviews" led by the Queensland government, the Unions and the University of Queensland are now underway in that state.

The CFMMEU is an appendage of big business, which polices the workforce to extract the maximum profit from workers. In response to the global downturn it has consistently attacked the working class, pushing through speed-ups and enforcing closures. In 2017, it imposed a sell-out deal on Griffin Coal workers in Western Australia who were pressured into accepting a 25 percent pay cut, as well as cost-cutting measures on 1,400 workers in Hunter Valley, New South Wales.

Mining in Australia directly accounts for over 247,400 jobs, making up 1.9 percent of employment. The number has dropped in recent years by 3.9 percent, due to the end of the China-driven mining boom. The result has been a deterioration in the already fraught conditions of mine workers with wages suppressed, casualised work expanded, redundancy entitlements thrown out and safety standards severely loosened.

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