

Australia: Worker presumed dead in Tasmanian mine collapse

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A mine worker is believed to have died as a result of a ground collapse at the underground Diversified Minerals-operated Henty Gold Mine near Zeehan on Tasmania's west coast early last Thursday morning.

The worker, a loader operator, has now been identified as 44-year-old Cameron John Goss, a resident of nearby Queenstown. He had been employed at the mine for about two years. At the time of the collapse, around 30 of the mine's 120-strong workforce were working at the site.

According to a union spokesman, the ground underneath the loader being driven by Goss suddenly collapsed, plunging the man and the machine into a 15-metre deep crevasse that opened up. The miner was working on night shift in the lower levels of the mine using the loader to fill a truck. The truck driver raised the alarm when Goss did not return with a further load.

The Tasmania Police and mining services contractor PYBAR have stated that a study of 3D scans and thermal imagery taken by rescue search crews using robotic equipment in the wake of the incident had shown no signs of life. This, and the amount of debris burying the loader, led them to conclude that Goss would not have survived the incident.

A spokesman for PYBAR said that the loader was "half-covered in rock", with the "cabin completely underneath the rock." The conditions that confronted search teams when they entered the mine last Friday were described as "extremely dark and extremely dangerous".

The situation has now moved from rescue to recovery. However, the extremely unsafe conditions around the area of the collapse have reportedly hampered efforts. According to a spokesman for the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the union that covers miners at Henty, the edges of the hole that swallowed the loader are highly unstable and further dirt and debris is showering down into the crevice.

"Where the road has given way is quite precarious, it's

quite difficult for anyone to get access to it to perform a recovery or to make a true assessment of what is required to make that recovery," the AWU spokesman said. He confirmed that retrieving the trapped mine worker from where he is thought to be located could take "long days if not weeks".

To date there has been no official explanation from the authorities, the company or the union on how it was possible that a roadway used by weighty mining vehicles carrying heavy loads could have collapsed. However, this extraordinary incident raises serious questions about the prevailing safety conditions right across the entire Henty mining operation, including if safety has been compromised—as has been the case in numerous workplace tragedies—for the sake of expediency.

In a statement to the media, the Tasmanian police confirmed the mine was not currently operational and asserted: "Mining is a dangerous industry, and anybody that goes underground has an inherent risk". Such an attitude, which is regularly rolled out by mining companies, governments and unions in the wake of mining fatalities, in essence accepts deaths as inevitable and distracts from any real probing of the underlying causes.

Such claims were rejected last year by David Cliff, a leading health and safety expert with Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre. In response to a spate of deaths in the coal industry, Cliff stated that modern safety standards meant all mine workplace accidents should be preventable.

"You need to be eternally vigilant," Cliff said. The key to fixing things is to predict the precursor events or situations before they become an accident." He added: "We need to get a really good reporting culture with no fear of blame."

Cliff's response stands in sharp contrast to that of the AWU on the Henty tragedy. In an extraordinarily guarded

statement in response to a question by the ABC about safety at the Henty mine, AWU national secretary Daniel Walton replied: “In the fullness of time, with the coroner involved, they’ll be making a fully formed view into how this happened... it would be premature to make any calls on the future of the Henty Mine.”

Official inquiries rarely lead to any substantial or fundamental changes that would prevent further tragedies. In the past, they have either whitewashed the circumstances that caused deaths or dragged on until the tragedies faded from popular memory.

If the fear that Goss was killed in the Henty collapse proves to be correct, his death will be the fifth mining fatality in the area in just six years, including three at the nearby Mt Lyell Copper Mine. Though these three deaths occurred six years ago, they are still the subject of a coroner’s inquest, which is scheduled to restart again in March.

The Henty Gold Mine opened in 1996 employing around 150 people but was placed in care and maintenance in 2015 by its then owner, Unity Mining. At the time Henty was producing up to 50,000 ounces of gold a year but was hit by falling gold prices that plunged by \$US300 an ounce from three years previous, cutting the company’s annual revenue by \$15 million.

Henty was reopened in 2016 when gold prices began to rise and after it was acquired by Diversified Minerals, an associate of PYBAR. Gold prices currently stand at \$1,485.59 an ounce. Even so, in February 2019 PYBAR announced a cost-cutting restructure, including the axing of 21 jobs, claiming to the AWU that it was making only a 3 percent return on investment.

The mining union did nothing to oppose the sackings that would have resulted in pressure for greater productivity from the remaining workforce. Instead, the union justified the company’s decision. AWU assistant state secretary Robert Flanagan declared: “The company is spending a lot of money on drilling to try and identify ore reserves and obviously this announcement is a part of the company cutting its cloth to suit the reserves that are currently available.”

The union’s reaction to the job cuts was not an aberration but expressed the decades-long collaboration of the mining unions with the major mining corporations. Under the banner of making Australian-based mining operations “internationally competitive,” the unions have assisted the mining companies to impose cuts to full-time work and conditions and suppressed any opposition from workers.

One of the consequences of this process has been the increasing casualisation of the mining industry workforce—a development that has contributed to unsafe conditions across the sector. Casual workers are in a precarious position and are more reluctant to complain about safety for fear of reprisal.

At the same time, employers are known to regularly cut corners and skirt safe working practices that may hinder the drive for ever greater levels of production. This state of affairs contributes to the fatalities and injuries in the mining sector. Over the past two years there were 19 catastrophic mining fatalities.

Moreover, governments, both Liberal and Labor, have over the years aggravated falling safety standards by cutting funding for inspectorates and effectively leaving the oversight of safety at mining sites in the hands of the companies themselves and the unions that collaborate with them.

If last week’s tragic incident at Henty Gold Mine has indeed claimed yet another life it will be the third mining fatality this year.

On Monday, a 64-year-old contract worker for DIAB Engineering died after sustaining serious injuries in an incident at the Roy Hill iron ore mine in Western Australia’s remote Pilbara region. Earlier this month a 33-year-old worker died after becoming trapped in machinery at the Curragh coal mine near Blackwater in Central Queensland.

Workers cannot place any faith in the unions or in appeals to Labor and Liberal governments that serve the interests of the mining magnates. The turn must be to the construction of independent rank-and-file workplace committees to oversee safety and lead the fight in defence of jobs and working conditions.



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