

The lessons of the 1994 Moura mine disaster in Australia

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Terry Cook, a long-standing member of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) delivered this speech at the webinar “Ten years after the Pike River mine disaster: Political lessons in the fight for truth about the deaths of 29 miners.” The webinar was hosted by the Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) to discuss the causes of the 2010 Pike River disaster and the efforts by successive New Zealand governments, abetted by the trade unions and the entire political establishment, to protect the corporate criminals responsible.

Dear friends and comrades.

When I first heard the news of the Pike River mine disaster, my mind raced back over the many similar deadly mining incidents in Australia that I have been assigned by the party to cover to establish the truth and alert the international working class.

The April 20 statement for this meeting makes the salient point that the Pike River disaster “was not a random accident but the outcome of deliberate decisions to place production ahead of workers’ safety.”

This is incontestable. It is certainly true of the string of fatalities and life-threatening incidents across the Australian coal mining sector that our party has investigated to expose the cover up attempts of the official inquiries initiated by various governments in the wake of such disasters.

Among the many tragedies, the one especially burned into my memory is the explosion at the BHP No.2 Mine on August 7, 1994 in Moura, Central Queensland, which claimed the lives of 11 workers. To this day, the bodies of these men remain entombed underground after the company sealed the mine in the wake of a second explosion. The 1994 disaster was one of three that occurred in Moura in less than 20 years resulting, collectively, in the deaths of 36 workers.

The memory of 1994 remains so vivid because as part of our party’s investigation I spent time in Moura, came

to know the victims’ families and witnessed first-hand their heart-breaking anguish over the loss of their loved ones during the interviews that I conducted with them in their homes.

However, this anguish was accompanied by growing anger over the utter contempt shown towards them by the company and the Queensland state Labor government of Premier Wayne Goss. In the wake of the disaster, Goss initiated a Mine Wardens Inquiry in a bid to contain the widespread outrage that erupted across mining communities. The purpose of this inquiry was not to establish the truth, but to whitewash the company and the government of responsibility.

The families’ anger later extended to include the Construction Forestry and Mining Union (CFMEU). Its role in creating the conditions for the disaster became increasingly clear as miners began to speak out, encouraged to a large extent by our party’s investigation and intervention.

In the immediate wake of the Moura disaster, the union had rushed to shield BHP from criticism, portraying it in the media as a “caring company.” It backed the fraudulent inquiry and, in an attempt to give it legitimacy, the union’s Queensland district secretary Peter Neilson served on its board.

The inquiry was forced to acknowledge that BHP was responsible for the miners’ deaths, having sent them underground to continue production while knowing a highly dangerous and unstable situation existed. But it still recommended that no charges be brought against the company or any of its managers or executives.

I note that George Mason, who held management positions at the Moura mine during the disasters in 1986 and 1994, was recruited by Pike River Coal in 2010. In 1994, he had instructed his undermanager at Moura not to inform workers of the dangerous build-up of gas in a sealed panel next to where they were working.

It also became clear that the CFMEU was fully aware of the dangerous conditions in the mine prior to the explosion, including the presence of explosive levels of methane, because the union had been informed by its own members. Criminally, it did nothing to prevent workers entering the mine.

After the recommendation for no charges was announced, management and the union representatives at the inquiry shook hands and congratulated each on the outcome while the miners' families looked on in utter dismay.

I wrote at the time that this recommendation "was a green light to the mining companies that they could continue to kill and maim, with impunity."

Tragically, this prediction has been borne out by the plethora of mining deaths and shocking injuries that have occurred across the sector ever since.

This included the deaths of four miners at the Wallsend Coal Company's Gretley mine in New South Wales in 1996. They drowned after the machine they were operating cut into an adjacent disused mine shaft releasing a powerful inrush of water.

Again, despite evidence that standard precautionary measures, such as forward drilling, were not undertaken by the company, because this would have cut into production time and profit, the state Labor government's judicial inquiry into the incident made no recommendation for criminal charges against the mine's owners or operators. The mining union president at the time, John Maitland, cynically hailed this outcome as "another very significant day in the history of health and safety in the mining industry."

Over the past months, our party has been closely following the Board of Inquiry into the explosion at Anglo-American's underground Grosvenor Mine in Central Queensland. This occurred on May 6 last year and left five workers with horrific injuries.

The inquiry was initiated by the Queensland Labor government for the same reasons as the 1994 Moura inquiry—to contain public anger that had already been generated by a spate of fatalities across the state's mines and to gain time to organise a cover to get the government and company off the hook.

This agenda became evident as early as last August when Anglo-American managers refused to testify to the inquiry on the grounds of self-incrimination—a move that was supported by the state government. The inquiry's chairman, retired district judge Terry Martin, admitted that Anglo's refusal would "seriously compromise the

inquiry and its ability to ever establish the cause of the Grosvenor Mine disaster."

The mining union, anxious to prevent any genuine probing of its own complicity in undermining safety across the industry, has backed this inquiry every step of the way, declaring last year that it was "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events."

In sharp contrast, injured miner Wayne Sellars, clearly determined that those responsible be held accountable, courageously gave evidence pointing to the extremely precarious conditions in the mine in the weeks leading up to the explosion, including the high presence of methane gas.

To prevent further deaths and injuries, mine workers need to take matters into their own hands. This requires the establishment of rank and file committees completely independent of the corporatist trade unions to oversee and enforce workplace safety and to organise a unified industrial and political campaign in defence of workers' conditions.

The central lesson to be drawn from the years of bitter experiences is that the present system based on private ownership and profit is completely incompatible with even the most basic requirements of the health and safety of working people.

This raises before miners and the entire working class the urgent need for economic life to be reorganised on entirely different priorities—to meet social needs, not corporate profits.

The mines and major industries must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class so that production can be organised on the basis of safe and rational planning. This is the socialist program that is fought for by our parties in Australia, New Zealand and internationally.



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