Operation ongoing to rescue 39 miners trapped in Vale mine in Sudbury, Canada

Roger Jordan
28 September 2021

Thirty-nine miners employed by the Brazilian multinational Vale were stranded underground for two days following an incident at the company's Totten mine Sunday. As this article goes to publication, 19 miners have successfully returned to the surface, with rescue efforts ongoing to get the remaining 20 out.

An incident occurred in the mine's shaft shortly after the beginning of a 7 a.m. shift Sunday, causing the conveyance system to be put out of operation. The 39 miners underground immediately went to refuge stations.

According to a statement by the company, Vale was in regular contact with them during the more than 24 hours that elapsed before the first miners could begin their ascent to the surface. Medical supplies were delivered underground to some of the workers by rescue workers using ladders. There are reportedly no injuries among the trapped workers.

The Totten mine is located some 43 kilometres west of Sudbury, northern Ontario's largest city, and employs about 200 people. Nickel, copper, and other precious metals are extracted there.

An internal Vale memo leaked to sudbury.com revealed that the incident was caused by a scoop bucket, which detached from the conveyance system and became caught in the shaft. The company considered two options to return the miners to the surface: one involving the use of secondary egress ladders, and the other deploying a hoist.

A relative of one of the miners speaking to sudbury.com Monday said that the miners will have to climb secondary egress ladders for 2,500 feet (762 meters) before being brought back to the surface in a cage. Miners and rescuers will have an opportunity to rest every 100 feet. She added that rescue workers are accompanying two miners at a time on the perilous climb.

"It's really nerve-wracking to know that they're underground, and they have no food," she continued. "They haven't eaten since yesterday. (Mine rescue) brought them protein bars and candy bars for food. The conditions there are not great. They're sleeping in boardroom chairs."

The ordeal for the miners and their loved ones comes at a time when the highly profitable Vale is doing all it can to maintain production at its huge Sudbury-area operations going at full tilt to take advantage of high prices for nickel and other precious metals. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Vale kept its Sudbury operations running without interruption thanks to the connivance of the United Steelworkers union. USW Local 6500 agreed to a one-year lengthening of the miners' collective agreement in 2020 to ensure the mines remained open. The extension amounted to a pay freeze for the miners.

Miners then waged a bitter two-month strike this summer to oppose Vale's concession demands, which included a real-terms wage cut and the elimination of health care benefits for retirees. The strike only took place because rank-and-file workers rebelled against the pro-corporate USW, voting down a USW-recommended tentative agreement by a 70 percent margin. The USW, which controls hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, followed this up by starving strikers on the picket lines with meagre strike pay of C$375 per week.

The miners' determined struggle forced Vale to remove some of its most aggressive concessions demands, including the elimination of health care benefits for new hires. The company worked behind the scenes with the USW to bring the strike to an end on the basis of an understanding that it could reap major profits by returning to full operations under conditions of booming commodity prices and lucrative contracts for the coming years with the burgeoning electric vehicle sector.

While miners have suffered gruelling work schedules and dangerous conditions, Vale is drowning in cash. Its 2020 global revenue amounted to some $40 billion, with

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close to $5 billion in net profits. Nonetheless, Vale still managed to obtain $67 million in government handouts during the pandemic under the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, a program ostensibly designed to protect workers' jobs.

This unbridled money-making bonanza has produced mounting anger among miners and the local community. As a relative of a miner said of Vale in a comment to the *World Socialist Web Site* during the strike, "Wait. ... Didn't you guys take billions of $$ during COVID? Were your top executives given large bonuses? If the answer is yes to both of these, I dare say you have no legs to stand on. Treat your employees with the dignity and respect they deserve."

This state of affairs would have been unthinkable without the USW's crucial role in facilitating the enforcement of massive, historically unprecedented concessions in the wake of the 2009-10 year-long strike. These included the introduction of the hated multi-tier wage system and a huge expansion of low-wage, contract labour. It is significant to note in this regard that only 30 of the 39 miners involved in the latest incident are USW members, an indication that a large portion of the workforce is made up of non-union, contract workers.

The USW's collaboration with Vale management has produced a steady undermining of miners' wages and benefits, and a corresponding deterioration in workplace safety. On Monday, as the 39 miners remained stranded underground, a fine of $120,000 was imposed by a Sudbury court on DMC Mining Service, a contractor that employs workers at Vale's Sudbury operations. The fine related to the injury of a worker due to falling rocks at Vale's Copper Cliff South project. The court concluded that DMC failed to take account of the danger of falling rocks triggered by vibrations from underground drilling.

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