

51 workers die in Siberian mine disaster

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A suspected methane gas explosion killed 51 people on Thursday in Belovo, a mining town in the Kemerovo region (also known as Kuzbass) in Siberia. Many of them were in their 20s and 30s, with the youngest just 23 years old.

Almost 50 miners are still being treated in a hospital. Several of them are in serious condition. It is the worst mine disaster in Russia since the 2010 Rospadskaya mine explosion, which left 91 people dead, and one of the worst in the three decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At around 8:20 a.m. local time, 283 miners were in the Listvyazhnaya mine when a methane gas explosion occurred. Those who died are believed to have suffocated. The high level of the deadly gas in the mine made the rescue operation, which lasted over a day, extremely difficult. It is also assumed to be the reason for the death of five rescuers. One rescuer, who had been believed dead, was found alive on Friday. Many bodies still have to be recovered.

A miner who survived the disaster in the conveyor building provided a harrowing account to a local radio station: “You know, I was saved from death by a few minutes. I was just looking at Tik-Tok. Then the explosion occurred, the methane exploded. The whole conveyor line stopped, I could hear it. It was the one that carries the coal.”

He described how his colleagues, upon hearing the explosion, immediately grabbed respirators and went down into the mine to save their colleagues. “They were very brave, you know, really. It makes me want to cry. These people should be given a medal. My brothers, comrades, they just ran there.” They were able to bring 10 miners up alive, and two others who had already died.

“You cannot imagine what was going on there. ... They were all terrified, very sick. They were black and wheezing, they could hardly breathe, but they were

breathing.” He added that his colleagues could not go further down to save more of their brothers because their respirators were not working properly.

The miner stressed that the disaster was both predictable and preventable.

“They (the mine management) don’t do anything about the rules of industrial safety. We need to make public what is happening in the mine.

“I have read that the mine was in a state of emergency [because of the violation of safety regulations], but that’s ridiculous. It’s been in this kind of state for a month, even more. You know, this all happened because there is no ventilation in the mine. Imagine, every time you’re going into the mine, you have to think about what might happen if you run out of oxygen.” He added that he had worked as a miner all his life but never under such horrendous conditions. The only reason he had stayed on the job was because he received 50,000 rubles a month for it, roughly \$660, two or three times more than other jobs in the town.

The head of the mine, his first deputy and chief of the section of the Listvyazhnaya mine were arrested on Thursday.

What occurred on Thursday was an act of social murder. Responsibility lies not just with the mine management but the government and the entire Russian ruling class.

There is no question that the mine should have stopped operations long ago.

According to Russian media reports, just this year 914 safety violations were registered in 127 safety checks. Operations had to be stopped nine times because of these violations. The mine had neither proper ventilation nor a working fire alarm system. The methane and air control systems were also known to be defective.

Yet the mine management was let off the hook with a ridiculously small fine of 2.8 million rubles (about

\$37,000), little more than a slap on the wrist. The mine employs almost 1,700 people and produced 4.7 million tons in 2020, resulting in a net profit for its owners of 836.7 million rubles (about \$11.06 million) and revenues of over 9.4 billion rubles (over \$120 million).

The Listvyazhnaya mine belongs to the SDS-Ugol (Coal) company, which is owned by Vladimir Gridin and Mikhail Fedyaev, both of whom were counted by Forbes among Russia's 200 richest individuals. They are part of a section of the oligarchy that has made its fortunes through the hyper-exploitation of the working class in Russia's coal sector, which is one of the largest in the world.

The same dynamic that underlay the disaster at the Listvyazhnaya mine—the conscious violation of even the most basic safety standards for the sake of profit and de facto cooperation between the state and the oligarchy—has led to countless similar disasters in Russia's mining sector since the restoration of capitalism. Many of these have occurred in the Kuzbass region, the center of Russia's coal production.

Between 2003 and 2010 alone, over 270 workers died in the five biggest mine disasters in the Kuzbass. At the Listvyazhnaya mine itself, there have been several fatal incidents in the past two decades, with the last occurring in 2017. In March 2018, a horrific fire at the shopping mall “Winter Cherry” in Kemerovo, the regional capital, killed 64 people, among them 41 children, who were trapped in the burning building. Yet again, the cause was the violation of safety standards by management, with the full knowledge of the authorities.

While particularly stark in the heavily working-class region of Kemerovo, these conditions are not unique to the Kuzbass. Hardly a week goes by without reports in the Russian press about factory fires or explosions.

These conditions are a direct result of the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy three decades ago. The Stalinist bureaucrats-turned-oligarchs systematically dismantled the social and industrial infrastructure that had arisen as a result of the 1917 October Revolution. The level of safety standards is no higher than it was in mid-19th century England, as all the conquests of the workers' movement in this regard were rolled back.

The same criminal indifference to the lives of workers and the subordination of every aspect of social life to the private profit interests of the oligarchy has

guided the response of Russia's ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic, just as it has in Europe and the US. With the pandemic completely out of control in Europe, it still claims over 1,200 lives every day in Russia, more than during any previous wave. The Kremlin rejects any public health measures that could curtail, let alone stop, the spread of the virus.



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