

Two workers killed in three days in Western Australian mines

Terry Cook
20 October 2022

In yet another tragic confirmation of the unsafe conditions in Australia's mining sector, two workers were killed in Western Australian (WA) gold mines over a three-day period last week.

The first was on Tuesday, when a 37-year-old contract worker was killed at the St Ives Hamlet underground mine near Kambalda, 60 kilometres from the city of Kalgoorlie. The mine is owned by South African resource giant Gold Fields, which has operated the enterprise since 1981. A second contract worker is reported to have sustained minor injuries in the same incident.

Gold Fields has declined to comment on the cause of the deadly incident. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) claims the company refused to allow the union's local inspector to enter the site in the immediate aftermath of the death.

Two days later, a 59-year-old man employed by mining contractor MACA was killed at the Capricorn Metals-operated Karlawinda open-cut gold mine when the light vehicle he was a passenger in was run over by a large dump truck. The driver of the light vehicle escaped injury. The mine is situated about 65 kilometres south-east of the town of Newman in East Pilbara.

While details of the incidents remain scant it appears both workers were employed under a "Fly-in Fly-out" (FIFO) arrangement, in which workers are flown into remote regions for working stints of 14 or 21 days. These punishing schedules have resulted in high levels of stress, psychological distress and suicides among the FIFO workforce.

The latest deaths follow a spate of mining fatalities across WA last year. David Armstrong, 25-year-old drill and blast operator, was killed on September 30, 2021 when the ground collapsed underneath him at the

Fortescue Metals Group's Solomon Hub open-cut iron ore mine in the Pilbara. Less than two weeks earlier, on September 17, a 52-year-old maintenance worker sustained fatal injuries at CITIC Pacific Mining's Sino Iron mine, near Cape Preston after falling from a conveyor walkway.

On June 10, 2021, Paul Tamati Ereka Martin, employed by mining contractor Macmahon Holdings, died after becoming unconscious at the Daisy Milano underground mine, 50 kilometres south-east of Kalgoorlie-Boulder. In June of this year, the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety (DMIRS) told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that its investigation into Martin's death was still ongoing.

In December 2020, Paige Taylor Counsell died after being hit by a truck at the underground Big Bell gold mine in the state's Murchison region. In July of that year, contractor Michael Johnson died at the Saracen Mineral Holdings Carosue Dam gold mine after falling 25 metres when the heavy excavator he was operating veered off a ledge.

In the wake of last week's deaths the WA Labor government joined the two companies in dispensing empty platitudes and condolences—standard damage control measures aimed at hosing down community concern and preventing any probing of the role of the government and mining companies in creating the conditions for such disasters.

After commenting that the two deaths "really [go] to show just how important it is that occupational health and safety is uppermost in everyone's minds when we go into the workplace," Deputy Premier Roger Cook declared: "Any death in the workplace, and particularly on a mine site, is obviously a shocking incident."

The record speaks against Cook's supposed concern

for workers' safety. The carnage in WA mines over the past two-and-a-half years has taken place on Labor's watch.

A DMIRS report released in March revealed that, in addition to the fatalities, between July 2020 and June 2021 there were 402 safety incidents in the WA mining sector classified as "serious"—that is, resulting in an injury that disables a worker for two weeks or more.

Many of those incidents, such as one in which a truck driver sustained injuries to his upper-body and right-leg when the haul truck he was in rolled over, could well have resulted in deaths. Over the same period there were 745 fires at mine sites including 72 at underground operations.

The fatalities and serious injuries have continued unabated despite new workplace health and safety laws that became operative in March. The laws introduced "industrial manslaughter" as a criminal offence carrying a maximum penalty of 5 to 20 years' imprisonment for individuals and fines of up to \$10 million for corporations. The legislation also contains clauses preventing the use of insurance to cover payment of such penalties.

While industrial manslaughter laws have been in place in other parts of the country for several years, they have gone largely unenforced, and have mostly been used against individuals or the owners of small and medium businesses.

When the industrial manslaughter laws were first introduced UnionsWA assistant secretary Owen Whittle breathlessly declared that they would "really shake up how industry looks at safety in this state." Following the latest fatalities, Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) WA secretary Mick Buchan admitted: "I don't think all of the companies have taken much notice so far on the industrial manslaughter legislation."

In other words, the CFMMEU is continuing to insist that the new laws will eventually lead the massive mining corporations to improve safety. All workers need to do is stand aside and wait.

The unions, no less than the government, are responsible for the unsafe conditions rife across the mining sector. They have sought for years to suppress workers' opposition to sweeping changes to employment conditions that have contributed to the danger.

These include a vast increase in the use of contract labour, known to be a factor undermining safety as labour hire companies cut corners on essential training and site induction in order to outbid their rivals for lucrative site contracts. While the state's mining workforce currently stands at 144,000, WA state mining engineer Andrew Chaplyn has said that 58 percent of reported work hours are attributed to contractors.

Workers should reject the illusions promoted by the unions that any government, Labor or Liberal-National, will introduce legislation to meaningfully improve safety, or any other aspect of working conditions, in mining or any other industry.

The WA government depends heavily on revenue from mining royalties and works closely with the multinational corporations to ensure their continued massive profits. Last year, the state's iron ore industry paid \$12.4 billion in royalties to the government's coffers. While such payments are hailed as a massive contribution to the state's economy, they pale against the enormous profits made by the iron ore extracting companies from sales that rose by 32 percent to \$156.9 billion in 2021.

To end the carnage in the mining sector, workers must urgently take matters into their own hands and establish rank-and-file committees at every mine site, independent of the unions, to oversee and rigorously enforce workplace safety and to take up a fight for all of their social rights.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact