

Australia: Two workers killed at Queensland zinc mine

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Two mining workers were found dead yesterday after a rescue effort lasting more than 24 hours at the Dugald River zinc mine in north west Queensland. Dylan Langridge, 33, and Trevor Davis, 36, had been working 125 metres below ground when their vehicle plummeted into a 25 metre chasm after the ground subsided beneath them on Wednesday morning.

Rescue workers employed drones to search for the workers and check the stability of the mine to determine that emergency crews and heavy machinery could safely be sent in. The vehicle was located in the early hours of Thursday morning, but rescuers were not able to dig through the rubble and reach the men until the afternoon.

A third worker fell 15 metres, but was able to escape his drill rig and was rescued almost immediately. He is being treated for “non life-threatening injuries” and is in a stable condition.

The deceased men and the injured drill rig operator were all employed by labour and mining services contractor Barmenco. Langridge had worked for the contractor since March 2020, and at the Dugald River site since later that year. Davis began working at Dugald River in November 2021, but had worked for Barmenco since August 2020. Both men were employed as charge up operators, responsible for explosives.

The Dugald River mine, near Cloncurry in Queensland’s north west, is one of the world’s largest zinc operations, producing more than 170,000 tonnes of zinc concentrate each year.

The mine is owned by MMG, a multinational corporation headquartered in Melbourne but listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. The company also operates the Rosebery zinc mine in western Tasmania, as well as copper mines in Peru and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In 2021, MMG reported a net profit of \$US920.5 million from revenue of \$US4.26 billion. The Dugald River mine alone contributed \$US482.9 million in revenue, a 46 percent increase on the previous year.

A 2019 Deloitte report found that around half of

Australia’s mining workforce is employed by a third party, like Barmenco. Almost 39 percent worked for service contractors, while 11 percent were engaged through labour-hire firms. The report showed labour-hire workers in the mining industry earn 20 percent less on average than direct-employed workers. Workers employed by service contractors are paid 6.5 percent less than direct employees.

The Queensland Mining Inspectorate reported in 2018 that third-party mining employees were more likely to be killed on the job: “Between 2007 and 2017, contractors comprised 73 percent of fatalities in coal mines and 46 percent of fatalities in metalliferous mines, although contractors only comprised 49 percent and 30 percent of the respective workforces.”

One factor contributing to this is that workers in less secure forms of employment are hesitant to speak up about safety issues. A 2019 survey by the Mining and Energy Union (MEU) of more than 1,000 Queensland coal miners found that 59 percent of casual workers were concerned about reprisal from the company if they voiced safety concerns, compared to 40 percent across the whole workforce.

Professor David Cliff, a research fellow at the University of Queensland’s Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that, while Australian mines are “amongst the safest in the world,” they are “still not as safe as they should be.”

Cliff added, “Fundamentally it is surprising that we still have fatalities... with high-technology, sophisticated machines, highly educated people, this should not be happening.”

But in fact the deaths continue, year after year. Across Australia, there were 161 fatalities in the mining industry between 2003 and 2021. In Queensland alone, at least 52 mining workers have been killed on the job since 2000. Five more only barely survived after a gas explosion at the Grosvenor coal mine in May 2020.

In 2019, after a spate of deaths in the industry, the state government commissioned Dr Sean Brady, a forensic

engineer, to conduct a review into all 47 mining deaths since 2000. The Brady Review found that, unless significant changes were implemented, “the rate of fatalities is likely to continue at current levels,” meaning around “12 fatalities are likely to occur over any 5 year period.”

“Almost all of the fatalities were the result of systemic, organisational, supervision or training failures,” Brady noted. Ten of the fatal incidents involved known faults that no action had been taken to resolve, in nine cases there had been “near misses” before the death, and in some, workers had previously died at the same mine in similar circumstances. More than half of the deaths involved “inadequate or absent supervision.”

While unstated by Brady, this makes clear that the mining unions bear considerable responsibility. Why, time after time, is work allowed to continue with known faults unresolved, where supervision is “inadequate or absent,” or while the circumstances that previously led to a death or “near miss” are unchanged? Because the union leadership serves as an industrial police force of management, suppressing any opposition by workers to dangerous working conditions and allowing the ever-increasing use of casual and contract labour.

Following the incident at Dugald River, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) announced that three of the Queensland branch’s top officials would visit the site “to begin the process of getting to the bottom of what caused this incident.” The union’s declaration that “Something like this cannot be allowed to occur again” is one that has been repeated time and time again, but the mining industry’s death toll continues to mount.

Despite its damning findings, the Brady Review’s 11 recommendations strike nowhere near the root cause of the ongoing deaths. No analysis is offered to explain why mining companies continually refuse to implement the straightforward, logical measures that would prevent these fatal incidents.

The simple fact is that these corporations are not willing to sacrifice even a small fraction of their vast profits to protect the health and lives of their employees. The subordination of human lives to the demands of shareholders is facilitated at every turn by governments and the union apparatus.

This is not by any means limited to the mining industry. The millions of preventable deaths caused by “let it rip” COVID-19 policies adopted by every government worldwide, in line with the demands of big business, provide a stark demonstration that the disregard for human life is a defining feature of the capitalist system.

The Brady Review is just one in an endless series of reports, investigations, boards of inquiry and coronial inquests, which all serve to whitewash the role of business,

governments and safety regulators in allowing deadly conditions to remain the norm in the resources sector. The latest of these, a Queensland parliamentary inquiry into coal mining industry safety, prompted by the Grosvenor incident, was released today, as rescuers were digging through the rubble at Dugald River, desperately hoping to find Langridge and Davis alive.

The mining unions consistently promote these investigations and the toothless recommendations they inevitably issue. This is, in part, because the bureaucrats are just as anxious as governments and corporations to avoid exposure of their role in undermining safety.

Prompted by growing anger among workers and the families of those killed and maimed in the mining industry, the MEU launched a campaign earlier this month under the banner “Justice for Miners.”

The union lists seven fatal or serious accidents in Queensland since 2019 in which charges have not been laid or have been dropped, despite substantial signs of negligence on the part of mining companies.

One of these is the Grosvenor explosion, in which the state’s Workplace Health and Safety Prosecutor refused to bring charges against mining company Anglo American, despite a mountain of damning evidence. A government Board of Inquiry found that the company enforced a rate of production that continually produced methane gas levels exceeding the capacity of the mine’s gas drainage system, abandoned measures to manage gas levels and did not carry out a required spontaneous combustion risk assessment.

But this MEU campaign is itself a smokescreen, doing nothing to mobilise workers, but instead promoting illusions that plaintive appeals to the state government, backed by a petition, will result in corporations being brought to account.

To improve safety and stop the constant stream of preventable deaths in the mining industry, workers will need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, not union bureaucrats, must be formed at every site to assess conditions, formulate demands and enforce safety measures.

The horrendous conditions pose the need to fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the mines, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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