

Australia: Ballarat Gold Mine reopens days after fatal collapse

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Ballarat Gold Mine, in regional Victoria, reopened Friday, the day after the body of a worker killed in an underground rockfall was recovered. The swift resumption of operations underscores the cynical character of professions of safety concerns by union bureaucrats since the man's death.

The fatal accident occurred just before 5 p.m. on Wednesday March 13, when a section of the mine collapsed, pinning two workers under rock. They were about 500 metres below the surface and three kilometres from the mine entrance.

Kurt Hourigan, a 37-year-old father of two, was killed in the collapse and a 21-year-old worker sustained life-threatening injuries to his lower body.

Another 28 miners were able to take refuge in a safety pod until they were rescued overnight by the Country Fire Authority's Oscar 1 mine rescue team. The 21-year-old man was airlifted to Melbourne's Alfred Hospital at around 8:30 p.m. and remains in a "serious but stable" condition. Hourigan's body was recovered shortly after 5 a.m. on Thursday.

The mine was shut down immediately after the incident, but reopened Friday morning, with the collapsed section sealed off pending separate investigations by police and the state safety regulator WorkSafe.

This is the second rock fall at the mine in the last three years. In 2021, 600 tonnes of rock collapsed into one of the mine's tunnels. In 2007, a cave-in at the mine trapped 27 miners. Fortunately, no-one was seriously injured in either accident.

A long-term resident of the Ballarat area told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "There have been calls from the community and miners for the mine to be shut down as unsafe for decades, but it seemed nothing would be done to stop the profits of the mining

companies."

The mine was acquired last year by Victory Minerals, a subsidiary of Singapore-based Chrysos Investments. Around 200 workers are employed on site mining and processing gold bearing ore. Gold production is estimated at between 40,000 to 50,000 ounces per year.

When the accident occurred, Hourigan and his injured co-worker were operating a handheld "air leg" drill. Federation University geology lecturer Haydn Swan told the *Ballarat Courier*: "The alternative to air legging is using a jumbo rig... which is a much bigger piece of equipment. It needs a space three by three metres, whereas an air leg you can mine something a metre wide."

This was inherently more risky than other methods, Swan said, because miners needed to be closer to the rock face being drilled: "If you're close to a working face, that's the most dangerous spot. ... The first four to seven metres that's unsupported is the most dangerous, there's literally a void underneath it."

The practice had not been used at the mine for around eight years before it was reinstated midway through last year, according to the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

Ronnie Hayden, secretary of the AWU's Victorian branch, told reporters air legging "was typically used to put anchors into the rock to hold it back, but in this case, it was being used to create a tunnel."

Hayden said Victory Minerals was employing the technique because it was "a quick, cheap and easy way to chase gold."

Ross Kenna, an AWU organiser, told Nine's "A Current Affair," "Our position still remains that the geology of Ballarat is unsuitable for air-legging. ... We believe it puts unnecessary risk on the workforce."

On the same program, Hayden claimed that a senior

safety operator at the mine had been made redundant after objecting to the technique and noted that “members have been contacting us frequently over the last couple of years about safety concerns and our organisers are always out there trying to resolve them.”

In an earlier press appearance, Hayden bemoaned the fact that while the AWU had passed workers’ concerns over safety on to management, “it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.”

What stunning hypocrisy! The AWU has been aware of unsafe conditions at the mine for years, exacerbated recently by the reintroduction of air-legging. Rather than mobilising workers against these practices through strikes—legal in response to immediate health and safety risks, even under Australia’s draconian industrial laws—the union leadership has worked to protect company profits.

While workers repeatedly raised safety concerns, the AWU responded by sending in officials to placate them and ensure they stayed on the job.

This is underscored by the swift reopening of the mine on Friday. The same day that the AWU published a press release declaring “we need to give miners and their families in Ballarat time to grieve,” the union herded them back to work within 48 hours of their colleague’s death.

Hayden welcomed the company’s announcement that air-legging would not resume until the police and WorkSafe investigations were completed. In an indication that the union is unlikely to challenge the practice if it is subsequently restarted, Hayden said he “hopes” the investigation takes “years.”

Hayden called on WorkSafe to use Victoria’s workplace manslaughter laws and bring charges against individuals found responsible. The state Labor government introduced these laws in 2020, making it an offence for a company or employee to act negligently or breach certain duties under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. The Act allows for maximum penalties of 25 years’ jail for individuals and fines in excess of \$19 million for companies.

The AWU and other unions have campaigned for and hailed the introduction of these and similar laws around the country, promoting illusions that legislation, rather than industrial action can resolve the dangerous conditions in mining and other industries.

Even Hayden was compelled to admit that these laws

have so far proved to be entirely toothless. He noted, “In the time since these laws have come in, we’ve had one prosecution and no jail time.”

WorkSafe, like its counterparts in other states, is a pro-business agency whose main role is to cover over the real cause of unsafe working conditions, the capitalist subordination of workers’ health and lives to the profit demands of big business.

Investigations conducted by these “safety regulators” invariably amount to nothing more than a whitewash, resulting in a slap on the wrist or minor fines that corporations consider a “cost of doing business.”

To improve safety and put a stop to 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.

Attempts by management and the union bureaucracy to herd workers back on the job in dangerous conditions must be opposed and strike action taken immediately where necessary to protect miners’ health and lives. The safety of workers cannot be subordinated to the profit interests of management.

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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