

Australia: Mine owner rejected safety measures ahead of fatal collapse, citing “significant cost”

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In the weeks following the death of Kurt Hourigan and serious injury to Connor Smith at Ballarat Gold Mine in Victoria, further detail has emerged about longstanding safety concerns at the facility.

Hourigan and Smith, employed by a third-party contractor, were operating handheld “air-leg” drilling equipment when the section of mine they were working in collapsed on March 13. The practice, which places workers dangerously close to the rock face they are drilling, had not been used at the Ballarat mine for almost a decade before it was reinstated in 2023.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) revealed on Wednesday that an internal memo issued by the mine’s then operator in the first half of last year had declared that the “globally accepted standard, that ‘we don’t work under unsupported ground,’ was “dated.”

The memo made explicit the real reason management opposed the use of basic safety precautions: “Ballarat Gold Mine is not currently a financially viable business and the high level of ground support is a significant contributor to the cost of production.”

Rejecting a “blanket approach” to ground support measures, the memo asserted that miners themselves should “have the responsibility and the authority to effectively manage the ground within their work area.”

In other words, workers were expected to put their health and lives at risk in order to bolster the bottom line of the failing company, which had entered voluntary administration in March 2023.

A significant contributor to the mine’s financial woes was the failure of Shen Yao, the Singaporean holding company that owned the operation from 2012–2023, to invest in sufficient storage for mine waste. As a result, the mine was unable to produce saleable refined gold for months on end in late 2022. The operation was acquired

late last year by Victory Minerals, which is in turn owned by another Singaporean company, Chrysos.

According to the ABC, five key personnel have been sacked since the mine entered administration, including the mine manager, a senior mining engineer, two geotechnical engineers and the head of safety. An additional two engineers resigned last June.

One of the sacked geotechnical engineers told the ABC he was let go within weeks of warning management that the reintroduction of air-leg mining without “minimum standard” ground supports could lead to rockfall-related injuries.

In a May 2023 email, sent in response to the memo, the engineer wrote: “Who will be responsible, or proven negligent, and ultimately be liable? ... This is all about duty of care to my fellow workers ... to ensure that we all get home to our families each night.”

By the following month, management had found a new consultant to sign off on the safety of air-leg mining “without surface support.”

It is not yet clear what supports, if any, were in place in the section of the mine where last month’s fatal collapse occurred. But Ronnie Hayden, Victorian branch secretary of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), told the ABC, “If the ground was supported, it wouldn’t have given away like that.”

According to the ABC, another incident occurred in the same part of the mine in July last year, when a surveyor was almost hit by a falling boulder. A second geotechnical engineer who previously worked at the mine said he was not aware of any significant investigation into the potentially fatal near miss.

He told the ABC, “these things shouldn’t [happen] in a proper, well-regulated mine.” He continued: “When you have that sort of incident happening, you need to stop and

re-evaluate what you're doing ... and whether you beef up your ground support."

Criticising the company's assertion that miners themselves could be solely responsible for their own safety, he explained that the geology of a mine was "intricate and complex ... something that has to be looked after by experts."

Further underscoring the dangerous character of this approach, another engineer who left the operation last year told the ABC that even the day-to-day oversight of hand-drilling operations was inadequate: "There was a gent set up as 'foreman' for air legging but he was also actively mining.

"There should have been a full-time foreman ensuring work was meeting all needs, geotechnical, vent, safety ... and he should not have been part of the air leg contract crew."

Hayden also denounced the arrangement, declaring "It's up to the mine manager to make sure that the conditions are safe, not the individual performing the task. ... When they put in proper ground support, they're making sure that it's safe for the workers to perform the task."

Hayden's comments conveniently ignored the role of the AWU in enforcing unsafe conditions at the mine. When workers repeatedly raised safety concerns, over a period of years, the union responded by sending in officials to pronounce the site safe and keep workers on the job.

In March 2023, when the administrators took over, the AWU welcomed the change, claiming that the mine's financial troubles and its poor safety record were "due to the previous management." But when the new regime brought in contractors to reintroduce air-legging, the union leadership did nothing to stop it.

While experts who objected to the practice were sacked, along with other personnel critical to the safety of miners, the AWU bureaucracy ensured that workers did not strike or carry out any other industrial action that might disrupt the mine's operations.

Even in the wake of Hourigan's death, Hayden made clear that the AWU will not deviate from this path of collaboration with the financial interests of management. He told the ABC-TV's "7.30" program, "We will absolutely work with this mine to make sure that it can be profitable and that our members are safe while they are doing the job."

The AWU bureaucracy's total commitment to the first half of that sentence, and the completely false character of

the second half, was starkly expressed when it did nothing to prevent the reopening of the mine, less than 48 hours after the fatal collapse.

This was approved by WorkSafe Victoria, the government safety regulator, with the collapsed section remaining temporarily cordoned off while it conducts an investigation. The abrupt reopening is a stark expression of the pro-business character of the state safety regulators, and a clear indication that this "investigation" will be yet another whitewash, resulting in nothing more than a slap on wrist for the mine's owners.

Attempts by management and the union bureaucracy to herd workers back onto the job in dangerous conditions must be opposed and strike action taken immediately where necessary to protect miners' health and lives. This is impossible, however, within the framework of the trade unions, which do not represent workers but serve as an industrial police force of management and governments.

To improve safety and put a stop to preventable deaths in the mining industry, workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, must be built in every workplace to assess conditions, formulate demands and enforce safety measures.

These committees must reject the conception that the safety of workers is a luxury, only available when profits are rosy. Last month's death of a 37-year-old father and the injury of his 21-year-old coworker are a grim illustration of the consequences of this approach.

Above all, this poses the need for a political alternative to capitalism, under which workers' interests are completely subordinated to the profit demands of big business. This means taking up a fight to establish workers' governments 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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