

On-the-spot report from Cobar, New South Wales

Two workers killed and a third injured in Australian mine explosion

Martin Scott
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Two workers were killed and a third hospitalised by a mine explosion in Cobar, far west New South Wales (NSW) in the early hours of Tuesday morning. The deceased have been identified as 24-year-old Holly Clarke and 59-year-old Ambrose Patrick McMullen.

The workers were killed at the underground Endeavor mine, 40 kilometres north of the town itself. The mine, which is owned by Polymetals Resources Ltd, employs some 250 workers. It is one of five currently operating in the Cobar basin and the fifth-largest silver, zinc and lead mine in Australia.

Few details are known at this stage, but initial reports indicate that the three workers had placed explosive discs on the mine wall and were in the process of returning to the surface when the charges exploded prematurely.

McMullen was killed instantly in the blast, while Clarke and the surviving worker, Mackenzie Stirling, also just 24, were brought to the surface. Clarke died at the scene from her injuries and Stirling, suffering hearing damage and shock, was airlifted to Orange Hospital, 360 kilometres south-east of Cobar.

Clarke, who grew up in Cobar, has family connections to the local mining industry, including several of her older siblings, according to the *Daily Telegraph*. She is the first female worker to be killed in Cobar's mines. Women were first allowed to work underground in Cobar and across the state in 1985.

McMullen, originally from Cootehill in County Cavan, Ireland, has lived in Australia for some years. He is survived by his wife and family.

The tragedy has rocked the small, tight-knit community of around 3,500, some one-third of whom are directly employed in the mining industry. In many cases, local families have worked in the mines for multiple generations.

A sense of shock is palpable in the town, likely magnified by a grim accident of timing. Over the weekend, many locals were participating in the Festival of the Miner's Ghost, an annual event held to commemorate the lives of miners killed in more than a century of metal extraction in the region. Few would have suspected that, less than 48 hours later, disaster would strike again.

Cobar's dreadful history—of workers and their families having their lives destroyed in the course of creating vast wealth for the mining corporations and the financial elite—announces itself to visitors almost immediately. At the eastern approach to the town

stands a prominent memorial park, including a small tunnel in which the names of all 171 (prior to Tuesday) miners killed in the local mines are commemorated on a wall of plaques. The base of this display is now adorned with fresh flowers.

This is the first fatal incident in the region's mines since 2017, when 36-year-old Mark Brilley was killed at Peak Gold Mine when he was exposed to extreme heat and diesel exhaust while operating an open cabin drill rig around 1 kilometre underground. But Tuesday's explosion violently shattered any illusions that deaths in Cobar's mines were a thing of the past or that longstanding safety issues in the mining industry had been resolved.

The Endeavor mine was shut down in 2020 after almost 40 years of continuous operation, before being sold to Polymetals in 2023.

The new owners reopened the mine just four months ago, after boasting to investors that new technologies and techniques would increase productivity and cut costs. In a November 2024 video, Polymetals Corporate Development General Manager Linden Sproule said the company had carried out geotechnical test drilling "to demonstrate whether we can use other mining methods which can accelerate the mining rate and reduce costs" and that, "the further we drill this thing the better it gets."

Sproule said over the 18 months from last November, he expected the mine to "generate in excess of \$120 million of free cash," which would "allow us to repay our debt and start spitting some dividends back to shareholders."

The exact cause of Tuesday's fatal explosion is not yet known, but it is only natural that Sproule's comments about cost saving measures raise questions over whether corners were cut before the accident—one which all agree should never have happened.

Two young Endeavor miners told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they had been stood down following the explosion, not told when the mine would reopen, and instructed not to speak to the press about the disaster.

Another worker from the mine said he didn't know when or if the mine would reopen. He said conditions there were not safe, and that "even if it does open there's a lot of people who will not go back.

"If the investigation finds that there's been negligence, then those responsible should go to jail," he added.

A retired miner whose family has worked in the industry for

decades, said there had to be a proper investigation into what occurred at Endeavor, because “it should never have happened.”

“If it’s blamed on faulty equipment, then the equipment should have been tested in advance. My brothers and others in the family are now pretty nervous about staying in the industry. They just want to be in a safe industry. This is very bad for the town,” he said.

According to national safety regulator Safe Work Australia, mining remains the fourth-deadliest industry in Australia in terms of raw numbers, with an average of 7.2 deaths each year but the third deadliest when workforce size is taken into account. Last year, the industry had a fatality rate of 3.4 deaths per 100,000 workers, exceeded only by transport, postal and warehousing, with 7.4 per 100,000 and agriculture, forestry and fishing, with 13.7 per 100,000.

University of Queensland Professor David Cliff told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that while total mining deaths had declined over the past two decades, there had been little improvement in the fatality rate in recent years.

In part, he said, this was due to the sophistication of modern mining, which is extracting resources that were impossible to reach in previous decades: “The geology is often much more complex, more technical, so the potential for things to go wrong increases if it’s not thoroughly planned and totally worked out.”

Cliff also noted the impact of the increasingly rapacious demands of the big mining companies and their investors: “There are also production pressures, fatigue can be an issue, skills can be an issue when you get high turnover at mines. There are a range of issues, some to do with humans, some to do with technology.”

Cliff called for a thorough investigation into Tuesday’s explosion, “to understand any underlying causes, so we can move forward and prevent these sorts of incidents.” But he noted that Safe Work NSW, the agency which, together with the police and coroner, will be tasked with carrying out such an inquiry, “has limited resources quite often,” meaning the investigation is likely to drag on for many months, if not years.

The most recent mining fatality in Cobar is a case in point. Mark Brilley was killed in April 2017, but it was not until October 2021 that a judgement was handed down. The judge found that Peak Gold knew that maintenance on an extraction fan was “likely to adversely affect the ventilation of the mine and could result in dangers to the health and safety of the workers engaged underground,” including “a risk of death.” But the company was fined a meagre \$480,000.

These limitations are not confined to NSW. In another egregious example, Anglo American is currently in the process of reopening its Grosvenor coal mine in Moranbah, Queensland, with the support of the state safety regulator and the Mining and Energy Union (MEU). In June last year, workers narrowly escaped a methane explosion at the mine, resulting in a fire that burned for an entire month. Four years earlier, five workers were seriously injured in a similar explosion at the same mine.

Officials from the MEU and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) share coverage of the metal mining sector.

MEU district president Bob Timbs declared, “We will do everything in our power ... to find out what happened and make

sure that it never happens again.”

He told the media: “We’ve got very robust legislation covering safety in coalmines and we’d like to see that be expanded to cover metalliferous mines.” He added, however, that the MEU had “concerns around safety” in metalliferous mines, particularly in NSW regional areas.

Questions need to be asked: What concerns? What action has the MEU taken to address them? And what does it intend to do now?

Addressing AWU delegates in Western Sydney yesterday, NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns declared, “accidents like this should not be occurring” in 2025.

He noted the longstanding inadequacies of Safe Work NSW but sought to blame this on previous Liberal-National governments, claiming that “Safe Work is changing” under his administration.

However, Minns then added, “As yesterday’s tragedy shows, we can’t stop all accidents on work sites, and we can’t promise that. No responsible government can do that.”

That is a declaration that such tragedies will continue unabated under the Labor government which defends the interests of big business and the corporations. Minns’ assertion that the deaths in Cobar could not be prevented, before anything is known about the circumstances, prejudices any inquiry and is a warning that a cover-up is in store.

It exposes the sham of his government’s minor funding increase and legislative changes to Safe Work, which will do nothing. The agency will still have fewer than 500 inspectors, ostensibly charged with protecting some 5 million people at work across the state.

It also must be a warning that no faith can be placed in the investigative bodies that have established a record of protracted processes designed to wear down the victim’s families and supporters only to send workers back into dangerous working conditions. Not just this tragic experience, but many others, have exposed that workers’ lives are seen as expendable in favour of the profit drive of capitalist corporations.



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