Australia: Polymetals moves to reopen Cobar mine days after fatal explosion

Martin Scott
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Just three days after two workers were killed and another was seriously injured in an explosion at Endeavor Mine, north of Cobar in far-west New South Wales (NSW), Polymetals Resources Ltd has announced that work will resume next Wednesday.

The blast at around 3 a.m. Tuesday took the lives of 59-year-old mining shift supervisor Ambrose Patrick McMullen and 24-year-old charge-up operator Holly Clarke, and left Mackenzie Stirling, also just 24, badly injured.

Polymetals was careful to emphasise that the return to work will be carried out in stages, beginning with "exploration drilling and concentrate transport" and the "completion of planned statutory electrical works."

But the reopening is a clear statement of the company's intent: It's time to put grieving aside and get back to the business of making money. This should be a stark warning for Endeavor workers that Polymetals is determined to send miners back underground as soon as it can possibly get away with it.

In utterly cynical fashion, the company's Executive Chairman David Sproule prefaced the reopening announcement with token phrases about "how deeply affected the Polymetals family is by this tragic incident" and empty promises that management would "not rest until we understand what happened."

In fact, workers are being ordered back on the job under conditions where, as Polymetals notes, "the cause of the incident is unknown."

The uncertainty over what caused the two workers' deaths and, therefore, whether it could happen again is less of a concern to Polymetals than the fact that its share price plummeted 26 percent yesterday when a temporary trading halt was lifted. The company's fundamental consideration is its bottom line, which it prioritises over the lives and safety of its workers.

The rapid reopening is extraordinary, especially given the NSW Resources Regulator has said it may consider banning the explosive devices involved in the workers' deaths. This would have major implications, not just for Endeavor, but for the entire mining industry.

It is thought from initial investigations that Clarke and McMullen were setting up a laser-sighted ballistic disc to clear a hang-up (blockage), when the device detonated prematurely. These explosives, which are designed to be detonated remotely from the surface at the end of a shift, come with multiple fail-safes that should make a tragedy like Tuesday's impossible.

However, with no clear explanation of what exactly happened, and given that experienced supervisor McMullen was held in enormous esteem by his colleagues as a highly skilled and extremely safety-conscious worker, the question of an equipment malfunction is starkly posed.

The Resources Regulator said in a statement yesterday it "may prohibit the supply and use of explosive charges" like those involved in the Endeavor explosion. The safety regulator also recommended that mine operators consider using "reasonably practicable alternative methods," instead of the ballistic discs, to clear blockages.

While expressed in the careful language of a government bureaucracy that has no intention of impinging upon the profits of the mining industry, this statement clearly indicates that the regulator has significant concerns about these explosives.

The Mining and Energy Union (MEU), the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the state Labor government—all the organisations that just days ago were calling for a "thorough investigation" to ensure this "never happens again"—have not said a single word on either the Endeavor reopening or the serious risk of

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a fatal fault with explosive devices used by miners across the country every day.

This profit-driven reopening cannot be allowed to proceed. A full investigation must be carried out, with Endeavor workers receiving full pay for the duration. Only when the cause of Tuesday's explosion is identified and remedied to the satisfaction of workers should production resume.

The deafening silence of the union bureaucracies must come as a stark warning to all workers. It means they is complicit with the company in enabling the mine to reopen. Restarting work at the mine before the investigation is completed and its findings are established means the inquiry itself will take a very distant second place.

This means workers and their families will have to take matters into their own hands.

A rank-and-file committee of Endeavor workers should be established as the means for workers themselves to oversee the investigation and determine when and if it is safe to return.

Through such a committee, Endeavor workers can make a powerful appeal for support from their counterparts in other mines, in Cobar and throughout the industry. Until the cause of Tuesday's tragedy is conclusively determined and rectified, miners everywhere could be in danger.

Miners are in a fight for their lives, and they are up against powerful forces—not just the company and the mining industry, run by the richest billionaires in the country, but their allies and apologists throughout the ruling class. Already, there are the beginnings of a filthy campaign in sections of the corporate media to point the finger towards the victims of the tragedy.

On 2GB Radio's *Ben Fordham Live*, explosives expert Darren Flanagan pointed to the possibility that the explosion was caused by a malfunction, impact from a rock fall or the entrance of "extraneous electricity" into the firing circuit. But Fordham seized upon his remark that "human error will be something that [investigators] will be looking at," repeatedly emphasising this to divert blame away from the company and the mining industry as a whole.

Endeavor workers are also up against the union bureaucracies, whose silence over Polymetals' outrageous reopening plan is only the latest example of their allegiance not to workers but to big business.

In March last year, the AWU oversaw the reopening of Ballarat Gold Mine just two days after a collapse that killed Kurt Hourigan, a 37-year-old father of two, and saw a 21-year-old worker sustain life-threatening injuries to his lower body.

In Queensland, the MEU has endorsed and is overseeing the reopening of Anglo American's Grosvenor coal mine in Moranbah, Queensland, where workers narrowly escaped a methane explosion and fire last year. Four years earlier, five workers were seriously injured in a similar explosion at the same mine.

Endeavor workers cannot be herded back into a death trap to fulfil the demands of management and increase the wealth of Polymetals' shareholders. Not a step must be taken into the mine until a full explanation for Tuesday's explosion is found and workers are satisfied that it is safe.

But mining workers, whether in Cobar or anywhere else, cannot entrust their health and lives to the unions, the government or the so-called safety regulators—without whose approval the reopening of Endeavor could not proceed. The role of these organisations is to cover up the underlying cause of all industrial accidents—the capitalist system that puts profits before lives.

This means that the immediate fight against unsafe reopening, which will have to be led by rank-and-file Endeavor workers, must be connected to a broader political fight by the working class, against the pro-business unions, safety regulators, state and federal Labor governments, and capitalism itself.

The Socialist Equality Party pledges to provide Endeavor workers and Cobar residents every assistance in taking forward this struggle. We urge you to contact us today to discuss this perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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