

# Fatal Cobar explosion part of broader trend of accidents in Australian mines

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One week ago today, an explosion at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor mine in Cobar, far west New South Wales (NSW), killed 59-year-old Ambrose Patrick McMullen and 24-year-old Holly Clarke and left 24-year-old Mackenzie Stirling with serious injuries, including possibly permanent hearing damage. Family members have set up a GoFundMe page to help support Stirling in her recovery, which, at the time of writing, had received more than \$10,000 in donations.

The incident was followed by predictable and hollow commiserations from union leaders, safety authorities and government officials, including NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns. All and sundry vowed they would "get to the bottom of this," and that it must "never happen again."

But with the investigation barely begun, no explanation of what caused the explosion and concerns emerging over the safety of explosive devices used widely throughout the mining industry, the company has announced a reopening, starting tomorrow. This announcement has been met with total silence from the unions, expressing their endorsement of the profit-driven move, which is clearly intended as the first step towards sending workers back underground into a death trap.

The response, or lack thereof, from the unions, and the endorsement by the state safety regulators, of the reopening plan underscores their role as cogs in the capitalist system, which puts profits over lives.

The fact is that the Endeavor incident is far from an isolated tragedy. It is part of a pattern, in Australia and globally, of preventable workplace deaths and injuries.

According to Safe Work Australia, there were 10 mining deaths in this country in 2024, almost double the six recorded in 2023 and well above the five-year average of 7.2. Mining is the fourth-deadliest industry nationally in terms of raw numbers, 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.

Many of these workplace deaths receive little or no coverage in the corporate media, sometimes only being reported several years after the fact, following protracted official investigations. What follows are just a few of the dozens of tragic incidents in the mining industry over recent years.

On September 17, 2021, **Eugene Tata**, a 52-year-old maintenance worker sustained fatal injuries when he fell from a conveyor walkway at CITIC Pacific Mining's Sino Iron mine, near Cape Preston in the Pilbara region of Western Australia (WA).

According to the *West Australian*, the company had "been the subject of 51 improvement notices and 12 prohibition notices" from the state safety regulator over the preceding six years, including in relation to "working at heights."

Less than two weeks later, on September 30, 25-year-old drill and blast operator **David Armstrong** was killed at Fortescue Metals Group's Solomon Hub, also in the Pilbara. Armstrong died when the ground between two drill holes collapsed and he fell into a void.

On October 11, 2022, 37-year-old father of six **Terry Hogan** was killed when he was hit by falling rocks at the bottom of a ventilation shaft while working as a driller at the Hamlet underground gold mine, near Kambalda in Western Australia.

His employer, RUC Mining Contractors was fined just \$540,000 last month, after pleading guilty to two counts of "exposing a worker to a risk of death, injury or harm to health" over Hogan's death and the physical and psychological injuries sustained by his coworker.

On March 13, 2024, **Kurt Hourigan** was killed and **Connor Smith** seriously injured in a collapse at Ballarat Gold Mine. An internal memo written the previous year was revealed in the weeks that followed, in which the company declared that the "globally accepted standard, that 'we don't work under unsupported ground,' was 'dated.'

In August 2024, two workers were killed in separate incidents at QCoal's Byerwen Coal Mine in Queensland's

Bowen Basin region.

On August 3, 48-year-old **Chris Schloss** was killed when he was hit by the boom of a pick and carry crane after it rolled over. On August 22, 56-year-old **John Linwood** was killed in a two-vehicle collision.

MEU officials gave their blessing to the rapid reopening of the site, before any investigation had been carried out, after the company supposedly “provided some evidence which demonstrates that they can resume operations safely at this stage.”

On October 2, 2024, 51-year-old **Frank Thomas** was killed and another worker injured when a cable snapped and struck them while they were conducting maintenance on a conveyor belt at Glencore’s Oaky Creek Coal Mine, also in the Bowen Basin.

In December 5, 2024, 29-year-old **Peter Groves** was killed at Saturn Metals’ Apollo Hill Gold Project near Kookynie in Western Australia, while working as a drilling contractor for Challenge Drilling.

On May 23, 63-year-old **Trevor Atkinson** died at BHP’s Olympic Dam copper and gold mine in South Australia. A spokesperson for the company said his death was the result of a sudden medical episode and therefore “not considered a work-related matter,” according to the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

The tragic incident indicates that there are likely many more workplace deaths each year, particularly of older workers. They are not included in official statistics, because they are not considered directly work-related even though factors such as stress, fatigue and illness might have contributed.

On August 21, 32-year-old mechanical fitter **Kyle Stanley** was crushed to death while working on a bogged truck at Gold Valley’s Wiluna West iron ore project in central Western Australia. Stanley was a fly-in/fly-out worker employed by labour-hire firm Premium Mechanical Group.

Following Stanley’s death, it was revealed that, months earlier, two former workers from Wiluna West had “warned site executives about potentially deadly work practices,” according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The pair, who had previously worked as a workshop supervisor and a contractor at the mine, also submitted formal complaints to WorkSafe WA just weeks before Stanley’s death. Chillingly, the former supervisor’s complaint warned, “Someone’s going to die and you’re going to have your first fatality [in 2025] at Wiluna C4,” the ABC reported.

According to the *West Australian*, the supervisor had been sacked in late May “after speaking out against unsafe practices on site.” The whistleblowers reported unsafe practices including the use of machinery with known safety

defects, “makeshift” tools and unqualified operation of “high-risk machinery,” the article stated.

Speaking to the ABC, the contractor pointed to the pressure on workers to go along with work practices that prioritise profits over safety. This is especially true under conditions of widespread use of labour-hire contract workers who do not have the same job security rights as direct employees. “If you don’t do the job, they’ll get rid of you and get somebody else in,” he said.

In response to the complaints, WorkSafe said it conducted an inspection of the mine on August 13 and had taken unspecified “enforcement action.” Whatever this action was, the obvious fact is that it did nothing to prevent the death of Kyle Stanley.

In the wake of the revelations, Mining and Energy Union (MEU) WA secretary Greg Busson declared that the union had been “concerned for some time” about the shortcomings of mining safety regulation in the state.

Australian Workers Union (AWU) WA secretary Brad Gandy said, “It’s not enough for WorkSafe to issue statements after the fact.... A truly effective regulator prevents fatalities, not just investigates them.”

The same could be said about the union bureaucrats, who know as well as anyone the realities of unsafe working conditions in the mines. Whatever “concerns” the MEU and AWU officials may have over safety in the industry, their overriding concern is ensuring workers stay on the job and there is no organised opposition to the deadly conditions in the mines.

These examples underscore that mining workers, whether in Cobar or anywhere else, cannot entrust their health and lives to the unions or the state safety regulators. The role of these organisations is to cover up the underlying cause of all industrial accidents—the capitalist system and the subordination of all human need to the profit demands of big business and the financial elite.

To defend their lives, as well as their jobs, wages and conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands. New organisations must be built—rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves, not highly paid union bureaucrats—to enforce workplace safety and fight for demands based on the needs of workers, not the profit interests of management.



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