

Cobar mine explosion: The lessons from the Beaconsfield and Grosvenor disasters

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It is now 15 days since an explosion killed two workers and left a third seriously injured at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor silver, zinc and lead mine in Cobar, far west New South Wales (NSW).

Little is yet known about what caused the deaths of 59-year-old Ambrose Patrick McMullen and 24-year-old Holly Clarke and left Mackenzie Stirling, also 24, with possible permanent hearing damage.

Despite the uncertainty, Polymetals is rapidly proceeding towards a full reopening of the mine, with the blessing of the NSW Resources Regulator, the state mining safety body, which has left it up to the company to decide when it is safe to resume blasting operations.

The unions that cover the mining sector, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Mining and Energy Union (MEU), have said nothing about the reopening, tacitly endorsing the company's move to herd workers back into a deathtrap.

To understand the complicity of the trade unions and government safety regulators in this dangerous reopening operation and the ongoing safety issues in the mining industry more broadly, and what workers can and must do to oppose this, it is helpful to review two of Australia's previous mining disasters.

Beaconsfield

On April 25, 2006, mining-induced seismic activity triggered a rock-fall at Beaconsfield Gold Mine in Tasmania, trapping three workers almost 1 kilometre underground. Fourteen other miners who had been working at a lower level narrowly escaped.

One of the trapped workers, 44-year-old Larry Knight, was killed in the collapse. Todd Russell, 34, and Brant Webb, 37, survived the rock-fall, protected by the light steel cage of a telehandler (cherry picker) in which they had been working.

Due to the extremely unstable condition of the mine and the complexity of the rescue operation, it would ultimately be 14 days before Russell and Webb were finally freed.

Just six months earlier, a tremor of similar magnitude, set off by blasting activity at the mine, had also resulted in a rock-fall.

Workers repeatedly warned management of the need to leave pillars to support the mine, with some specifically raising that level 925, where Russell and Webb were trapped, should be left un-mined. But the company was not prepared to leave any of the precious metal in the ground for the sake of workers' safety.

The government commissioned an inquiry conducted in secret, behind closed doors. Its restrictive terms of reference specifically

excluded any examination of the system of "self-regulation" introduced in Tasmania by the state Labor government in 1998. The safety of mining workers was left entirely to the companies that derived their wealth from exploiting them. Predictably, this inquiry let both the company and the government off the hook.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) completely endorsed the cover-up. AWU National Secretary Bill Shorten declared that the inquiry's terms of reference were "exactly what the AWU had sought."

This endorsement exposed the fraud of AWU Vice President Paul Howe's earlier denunciation of self-regulation when he declared "the industry isn't interested in providing safe workplaces. All they are interested in is making as much money as they can as quickly as they can."

Howe's comments were designed to give miners and their families the impression that the AWU would lead a fight for safety and the abolition of self-regulation. In fact, as Shorten made clear, the union was working to channel workers' and public anger over the Beaconsfield disaster behind the toothless inquiry.

This was completely in line with the actions of the AWU and unions more broadly over preceding decades. Since the 1980s, the unions had made major concessions to companies designed to make them "internationally competitive"—including around-the-clock shift rosters to ensure continuous production, 12–14 hour shifts and seven-day working.

The coronial inquest into Knight's death, when it was eventually held in 2008–09, heard revealing testimony.

Miners reported being told by management that the mine was "under the pump from Macquarie Bank," and that jobs would be cut if production targets were not met. Level 925 was known to be a "dodgy stope." The company was warned by its own experts to leave it alone, but it was mined "flat out," because it contained one of the richest veins in the mine.

The state mine inspectorate, Workplace Standards Tasmania (WST), was woefully under-resourced, the coroner found, leaving it "incapable of carrying out its core functions of inspecting and enforcing best safety practices within the mining industry."

The evidence showed that the company, by putting profits ahead of safety, produced the conditions that caused Knight's death. Labor's self-regulation policy and the slashing of WST's budget allowed it to happen. In the end, however, the coroner held no-one responsible. In other words, it was a whitewash.

On May 6, 2020, a methane gas explosion at Anglo American's Grosvenor underground coal mine in central Queensland left five workers with horrendous burns and other injuries.

One of the workers, Wayne Sellars, who suffered burns to 70 percent of his body, as well as kidney failure and blood clots on his lungs, gave revealing testimony to the Coal Mine Board of Inquiry in April 2021.

Sellars said he had observed methane coming up through the floor of the long wall area "for quite some time." In the eight weeks before May 6, there had been 14 "high potential incidents" (HPIs) of excess methane levels in the mine, during which, he said, his crew was never evacuated.

Sellars testified that if workers complained about the dangerous conditions, management would "come back and they'd tell us to keep going."

The inquiry revealed that Anglo American knowingly put workers' lives at risk by enforcing a rate of production that released methane gas into the mine faster than it could be removed. Rather than capping production at safe levels, management implemented bi-directional mining to speed up the extraction.

Anglo American also did not carry out gas mitigation measures before work on long wall LW104 started, or a required spontaneous combustion risk assessment.

The Queensland Inspectorate of Mines, responsible for workers' safety in the industry, was aware of the continuous dangerous gas exceedances and HPIs on the mine's previous LW103 operation. This was caused in almost every case by management's demands for speedup. The regulator also knew that gas levels at LW104 were at least 65 percent higher than at LW103.

A thorough inspection was not carried out before work commenced on LW104. Regional Inspector Stephen Smith told the inquiry that the regulator instead relied on the company's assurances—that "the mine's actions in managing these issues was generally effective."

The inquiry found that Anglo American had subjected Grosvenor workers "to an unacceptable level of risk," and that the inspectorate "did not give LW104 the attention it warranted." But its recommendations still left safety in the hands of the company, simply calling for Anglo American to conduct reviews of its operations.

The state Labor government whose finances relied heavily on mining royalties, set up the inquiry to defuse the widespread anger over the explosion. It was always intended to whitewash the responsibility of the company, the safety regulator, and the government itself.

In February 2022, Queensland's Workplace Health and Safety Prosecutor announced no charges would be brought against any Anglo American official.

The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) hailed the inquiry as "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events." It fraudulently claimed the inquiry's toothless recommendations, which left workers' lives in company hands, would lead to "systemic improvements in the industry."

The CFMMEU's attitude to the inquiry was not an accident or an error of judgement. The union had clearly been told by workers of the dangerous conditions at Grosvenor, but it ensured that production continued, putting corporate profits ahead of the health and safety of

its own members.

In 2021, Anglo American was allowed by the state safety regulator to resume operations at the Grosvenor mine. Workers opposed the reopening, signing a petition stating that management had "given us no reason to believe they have addressed the culture of poor safety or that they have put in place measures that will prevent a repeat disaster."

But this petition was a CFMMEU stunt to head off any industrial action by workers against the reopening. The company shifted an executive or two which was the only precondition for sending workers back into the mine. It was also used to isolate Grosvenor workers from other miners, by painting the safety issues as unique to that mine and its local management.

Just three years later, on June 29, 2024, workers at Grosvenor narrowly escaped injury when a fire broke out that burnt for all of July. The mine was sealed as part of the efforts to extinguish the blaze. Now, however, Anglo American is in the process of resuming operations again, with the full support of the state safety regulator and the union bureaucracy.

The Beaconsfield and Grosvenor disasters are just two among many that demonstrate that mining workers cannot entrust their health and lives to management, governments, so-called safety regulators, or the unions. The purpose of official inquiries is not just to whitewash their role but to cover up the underlying cause of all industrial accidents—the profit system and its subordination of lives of working people to profits of the super-wealthy few.

The deaths of Ambrose McMullen and Holly Clarke must not be allowed to be swept under the rug as so many have been in the past!

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges Endeavor workers to take matters into their own hands. A rank-and-file safety committee should be established to carry out its own investigation to determine when and if it is safe to return. Workers must be fully compensated for the duration—they should not have to pay for the unsafe conditions created by the company.

Through such a rank-and-file committee, a powerful appeal for support can be made to other mine workers, in Cobar and throughout the industry. While the cause of the explosion remains unknown, miners everywhere could be in danger. The SEP offers every political assistance to such a committee.

Contact the SEP.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact