

Australia: Hundreds attend memorial service for Cobar mine worker Ambrose McMullen

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Hundreds of workers, friends, family and local Cobar residents attended Friday's funeral of Patrick Ambrose McMullen, to pay their respects to the 59-year-old mining shift supervisor who was tragically killed in an explosion at the Endeavor silver, zinc and lead mine late last month. The blast also took the life of 24-year-old charge-up operator Holly Clarke, and left team member Mackenzie Stirling, also 24, with serious injuries, including hearing damage.

The large attendance at the memorial, more than filling the stands of the Tom Knight Memorial Oval, reflected the fact that McMullen's death is a loss, not just to his family, but to the whole town, which has a population of just 3,500.

According to an initial report from the NSW Resources Regulator, it is believed that Clarke and McMullen were setting up a laser-sighted ballistic disc explosive to clear a hang-up (blockage), when the device detonated prematurely at around 3 a.m. on October 28. McMullen was killed instantly, while Clarke was brought to the surface but died from her injuries.

Now, two-and-a-half weeks on, no explanation has been provided as to how or why the premature detonation—considered inexplicable by many workers and experts—occurred.

Serious questions have emerged. The Resources Regulator flagged that it “may prohibit the supply and use of explosive charges” like those involved in the Endeavor explosion. The agency also recommended that mine operators consider using “reasonably practicable alternative methods,” instead of the ballistic discs, to clear blockages.

That the state safety regulator would even raise the possibility of banning a widely used explosive device reflects just how serious its concerns are. While the pro-

business government agency has no intention of impinging upon the profits of the mining corporations, it is putting the warning on the record in case more workers are killed before its investigation is complete.

An attempt by Radio 2GB and other media outlets in the days following the explosion to insinuate “human error”—that is, the victims—were to blame for the tragedy has been met with outrage. As numerous former co-workers of McMullen have told the *World Socialist Web Site*, he was hardworking, highly skilled, an expert in explosives and, above all, extremely safety conscious.

McMullen's high standards, intelligence and dedication to perfecting his skills were highlighted in the moving service on Friday. Almost every speaker recalled his work ethic and refusal to do anything by half measures.

As well as being extremely diligent and a stickler for detail, McMullen was a leader in his field who took seriously the challenge of working with explosives. Whatever he set his mind to, he not only researched, but practiced, refined and perfected.

McMullen also shared his knowledge. He trained and mentored new workers and spoke highly of his young colleagues, Clarke and Stirling.

McMullen was well known for his involvement with the local rugby league club, which he approached with the same seriousness and energy as his work. He was also remembered as a family man. Married for almost 30 years, he was immensely proud of his four sons and considered them to be his greatest achievements.

Officials from the Australian Workers Union and Mining and Energy Union were notably not among the speakers at the funeral service. The unions have been virtually silent since the explosion took place. It is not clear if company representatives or local politicians

were present or had sent messages of condolences but they did not speak on the day.

Friday's moving tribute left no doubt that Patrick Ambrose McMullen's life will long be remembered and celebrated, not just by his family and close friends, but by the whole Cobar community, as well as those who knew him back in Ireland, where he grew up in Cootehill, County Cavan.

Equally important, however, is that McMullen's death is remembered by the working class, and that the major questions it poses are answered. What caused the tragedy that killed McMullen and Clarke, and left Stirling seriously injured and traumatised?

A full investigation must be carried out to determine exactly what happened. But this cannot be left in the hands of the government authorities: the NSW Resources Regulator, police or the coroner. Investigations by these agencies into mining and other workplace deaths are invariably protracted affairs that never hold companies accountable for the unsafe conditions they create, let alone resolve the safety issues and prevent further deaths.

The purpose of the official investigations is to sweep these tragedies under the rug and cover up what is ultimately responsible for the killing of workers on the job: the relentless demand of corporations and their financial backers for ever-growing profits, whatever the cost to workers.

The families, friends and co-workers of McMullen, Clarke and Stirling deserve the truth, along with the working class as a whole. They cannot rely on Polymetals, which moved almost immediately to herd workers back on site, under conditions where no-one knows what happened, or on the Resources Regulator, which approved the reopening. Nor can they trust the mining unions, which have maintained a complicit silence as the company prepares to send workers back into a potential deathtrap.

Whatever the cause of the October 28 tragedy, whether a malfunction of the explosives, the way they were triggered, or any other aspect of operations at the mine, is of consequence not just for Polymetals workers, but throughout the mining industry. Workers everywhere need to know, but the truth will have to be fought for.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers and their families in Cobar to take matters into their own hands

and establish a rank-and-file committee to oversee this investigation, ensuring it determines, to the satisfaction of workers, what caused the disaster. Until that is done, workers should not set foot in the mine. Endeavor workers should be fully compensated until the investigation is complete and measures are taken to ensure the mine is safe.

The SEP will provide every possible political assistance. We urge you to contact us today.



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