

# Australia: Cobar mine fully reopened, although cause of deadly explosion still unknown

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Just three weeks after two workers were killed and a third injured in an explosion at the Endeavor mine in Cobar, New South Wales (NSW), the company has announced the full resumption of operations at the site.

Polymetals Resources Ltd, which had previously claimed it would gradually reopen in stages, announced yesterday that “mining and milling operations have successfully recommenced” and that continuous shift work was being reinstated.

The rapid reopening is proceeding although the official investigation has barely begun and no explanation has been provided for the explosion that caused the deaths of Patrick Ambrose McMullen and Holly Clarke and left Mackenzie Stirling seriously injured and traumatised.

The little that has been said by the NSW Resources Regulator, the government agency responsible for mining safety raises more questions than answers.

According to the regulator’s initial statement, published days after the tragedy, the workers were killed by the “unintended initiation” of a ballistic disc explosive device they were setting up to clear a blockage in the stope.

This scenario is one that explosives experts and numerous workers familiar with the widely used devices had thought was impossible, due to the multiple failsafes involved with their use.

The reputation of the 59-year-old shift supervisor McMullen as a meticulous and extremely safety-conscious worker with considerable expertise and experience in the use of explosives would tend to point to an equipment malfunction or other systemic fault as the cause of the disaster.

The Resources Regulator, a pro-business entity,

clearly has concerns about the ballistic disc explosives. This is underscored by its declaration that it may ban the devices, and its recommendation that mining companies consider alternative methods until the investigation is complete.

Polymetals Executive Chairman David Sproule admitted the company was reopening the mine despite having no idea what happened on October 28 and what must be done to stop it from happening again.

In a press release issued yesterday, Sproule said, “We remain focussed on seeking to understand how this accident happened, hoping that any definitive outcome may improve safety in blasting operations on an industry wide basis.”

Far from “seeking to understand” what happened, the company is herding workers back down the mine. Without an understanding of the cause of the explosion and the implementation of appropriate safety measures, miners are being put at risk, not just at Endeavor, but throughout the mining industry.

Polymetals justified the reopening by declaring that, “A rigorous review of our handling and use of explosives procedures was completed prior to recommencement of operations.” But without knowing what went wrong, the claim to have conducted a “rigorous review” is meaningless.

The press release points to the company’s real financial motives for the rapid reopening. “Now that operations have recommenced, the Company will continue to manage working capital, utilising its existing concentrate pre-payment facility... Polymetals is in advanced discussions for standby credit facilities to provide further capital if required.”

Polymetals is not in a strong financial position. The

Endeavor mine is the company's only going concern and it only began continuous production in June, months later than anticipated.

The delays forced the company to secure a \$10 million loan through Ocean Partners. By July, the company estimated that it had less than six months of funding left, and had to raise a further \$15 million through the issuance of shares.

Polymetals' first shipment, of zinc concentrate, was only made in October, and its second, of silver-lead concentrate—for which it already accepted a substantial pre-payment—has now been pushed back from this month to next.

The swift resumption of production at Endeavor is being carried out under significant financial pressure from its creditors and shareholders. It was no accident that the company made its initial reopening announcement on the same day its share price lost 26 percent of its value.

These are the financial considerations motivating Polymetals' rush to reopen Endeavor. But workers should not be made to pay for their employer's financial troubles or the death of their coworkers by being forced back into a deathtrap.

Workers and their families cannot rely on "hope." Lives are at stake. No faith can be placed in the company's supposed "rigorous review" of explosives handling and use.

Nor can workers trust the Resources Regulator, which is allowing the reopening to go ahead without limitation. Strikingly, the regulator left it up to the company to decide it was safe to resume blasting operations, despite its ongoing investigation and publicly stated concerns about the explosives used.

The mining unions, the Australian Workers Union and the Mining and Energy Union, which have said nothing about the tragedy since their hollow promises in its immediate aftermath to ensure it never happens again, have also given their silent consent to the reopening.

This means Endeavor workers need to take matters into their own hands. A rank-and-file committee should be established to lead a fight to reverse the reopening, until workers can determine for themselves, through an investigation they oversee, that it is safe to return. They must insist that workers are fully compensated throughout this process, so they are not under financial

duress to return to a dangerous workplace.

Endeavor workers will find strong support for this fight among their counterparts in other mines, in Cobar and throughout the mining industry, across Australia and globally. As long as it remains unclear what caused the tragedy, miners everywhere could be in danger.

The Socialist Equality Party will provide every possible political assistance. We urge you to contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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