

Australia: Cobar mine workers should defy the company gag order

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In the early hours of October 28, an explosion at Cobar's Endeavor silver, zinc and lead mine claimed the lives of mine workers Patrick Ambrose McMullen, 59, and Holly Clarke, 24, and left Mackenzie Stirling, also 24, with serious injuries. The immediate reaction of the company, Polymetals Resources Ltd, was to impose a pall of silence upon workers at the mine.

Cobar residents have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Endeavor workers have not only been instructed not to speak to the media, but even to their own families about the tragic death of their colleagues and the conditions in the mine.

This is an extraordinary attack on democracy that workers and their families should not accept. Serious questions must be asked: Why are workers being muzzled? What is the company trying to cover up? Above all, how is it possible that members of a trained and qualified team, led by a man known to all as a highly safety-conscious, meticulous, expert worker, were killed at work?

Extraordinary as it is, the silencing of workers in the aftermath of a workplace death is not unique to Cobar. Just days ago, 24-year-old rigger Jack McGrath was killed at BlueScope's Port Kembla Steelworks, and his coworkers have been subjected to a similar order not to speak.

The claim that workers must be gagged to facilitate an investigation into the incident by the same organisations that allowed it to happen is a fraud. In fact, the suppression order is aimed at preventing the truth from seeing the light of day, and at blocking the development of organised opposition to the rapid reopening of the mine.

Buffeted by a sharp fall in its share price, the company announced just three days after the incident that it would begin reopening the following week. Since then, the company has twice increased the pace of its return-to-

work operation, culminating in the announcement Tuesday of the full resumption of mining.

The NSW Resources Regulator, despite flagging concerns over the safety of the explosive devices involved in the incident, has allowed this to proceed, leaving it entirely up to Polymetals to decide if it was safe to resume blasting. The company's supposedly "rigorous review" of its explosives handling has left its executive chairman still "seeking to understand" what happened on October 28, but the reopening is proceeding regardless.

In its brief statement, the regulator recommended that mines consider an alternative to the ballistic disc explosives used at Endeavor, but provided no further details.

It is not only Endeavor workers feeling the pressure to remain silent about safety in the mines. The whole town is being put under pressure to say nothing. Employees of the local council have also told the WSWs they are not allowed to speak about the incident and its implications for the safety of mining workers.

In a small, remote town like Cobar, which has a population of around 3,500, almost every aspect of life is dominated by the mining industry. The other major companies in town—Harmony, which owns the CSA copper mine, and Aurelia, which owns the Peak gold mine—are just as motivated as Polymetals to limit any discussion of safety and other working conditions in the mining industry.

The overwhelming majority of workers are either directly or indirectly employed in the mines. The local retail and hospitality businesses are heavily dependent on their custom and that of fly-in-fly-out workers engaged by the mines. Schools, sporting clubs, parks, community groups and the local newspaper all rely on sponsorships or advertising from the mining corporations.

As such, there is a considerable weight on the whole population not to speak out against the company line. This

is amplified by the mining unions, which have silently endorsed the reopening and promoted illusions in the official investigation.

We call on workers to break this silence. Ambrose McMullen, Holly Clarke and Mackenzie Stirling, as well as their families, friends and coworkers, deserve the truth, as do all workers, as more lives could be at stake at Endeavor and throughout the mining industry.

As has been the case in many other worker deaths, the official investigations will almost certainly be cover-ups, holding no one responsible and at most giving the company a slap on the wrist and a token fine. Recommendations will likely be issued, but never implemented or enforced. Polymetals, and all the other mining companies that derive their vast profits from workers labouring in dangerous conditions, will be allowed to continue, virtually as if nothing had happened.

This means that the truth will only be exposed through an investigation led by workers themselves. A rank-and-file committee should be established at Endeavor to oversee this. In the first instance, this committee should oppose the reopening of the mine and insist that workers are paid in full for the duration of the investigation. Not a single step should be taken into the mine until the cause of the October 28 tragedy is established and rectified, to the satisfaction of workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party pledge to provide every political assistance in this fight for truth. We urge workers at Endeavor and others in Cobar and throughout the mining industry to contact us with whatever information you have about the October 28 incident and safety in the mines. We will protect your anonymity from the companies, unions and government authorities.

Contact the SEP:

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To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact