

Australia: Cobar miner warns fatal accident at Endeavor Mine could be repeated

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A miner in the town of Cobar has warned that the fatal accident that claimed the lives of two workers and injured a third in late October could be repeated, under conditions where the company, Polymetals Resources Ltd, last week carried out a full resumption of operations at its Endeavor Mine where the tragedy occurred.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is protecting the miner's anonymity to ensure that he is not subjected to victimisation.

The worker raised specific concerns about the ongoing use of electrical detonators at the mine in the central west of New South Wales, noting that there were discussions among workers that the devices could have been responsible for triggering the unplanned explosion.

The worker knew 24-year-old Holly Clarke, one of the victims of the October 28 disaster, alongside 59-year-old Patrick Ambrose McMullen. Mackenzie Stirling, also 24, has reportedly been left with serious injuries and trauma.

"The impact on the town has been huge," he said. "Holly was a great person who knew so many people in Cobar and the area. She was wise beyond her years. She won't have the chance to fulfil all the dreams that she had. She had never been overseas, for instance, and she was planning on a trip next year. Her life was just beginning. It's so unfair and so unfortunate. People are devastated."

The worker said that while "we don't know what caused this," he had serious concerns about the possible role of electrical detonators.

He explained, "You have to work extremely safely with them, and even then, they're still dangerous. They can fire from any form of current."

The worker contrasted these potential hazards with the safety of electronic detonators, which he said other mines were increasingly using, in some instances because of incidents with electrical detonators. The electronic devices "have so many fail safes to prevent an accidental

firing." A digital logger would transmit information and then an encrypted firing key would have to be attached before firing. The devices, the worker said, were not susceptible to atmospheric electrical currents.

Referring to the accident, he said, "We don't know what caused the explosion. It could have been static, or a radio, but I do know it was unintentional, which is not acceptable at all.

"I had heard broader concerns about safety at Endeavor. I've heard of people leaving, because they were worried about it, over different things, including the ground conditions. You've got to remember that this is an old mine. It was only shut down for five or six years, but decay happens pretty fast. When you don't have ventilation and it's humid and hot, all the mesh rots, the ground support starts to rust away and things like that. It really doesn't take long, especially in humid areas."

Operations resumed at Endeavor last year, after Polymetals struck an acquisition agreement.

The worker condemned attempts by sections of the media to insinuate that "human error" on the part of the miners may have been the cause. He noted that this line had been pushed by the host of a radio program on 2GB.

He knew from colleagues and friends that "Ambrose was very knowledgeable. You would be hard pressed to find a shift boss who knew more than him about explosives. He would not cut corners. He was by the book."

McMullen was also reportedly enthusiastic about his two younger colleagues. He had told friends that Clarke and Stirling were "fantastic at their job." The miner commented "I think we can safely rule out human error."

"I don't think what the company has done in sending workers back on the job is right at all," he said.

He noted reports of a company edict directing workers not to speak about the incident or conditions to anyone, including relatives. "The way you get through grief is by

speaking to people. And if you've got issues with the company or how things are, what they're making you do at this point, I think you should be able to speak. They wouldn't put a gag order if there weren't things that they didn't want to be discussed."

The miner noted another silence, that of the unions that cover the sector, the Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Workers Union. "The unions have created a hoo-ha around much smaller things, but I haven't heard a peep from them this time round," he commented.

"I was surprised. I thought they would kick up a stink. They should have said that until the investigation is completed and we know what caused this, anything that might have played a role should not be used.

"The unions should have said, 'all right, electrical detonators, have a hold on them. Until we figure out why this happened, just so it does not happen to anyone else, we'll put a pause on that. You can't use them until the investigation is wrapped up.' Rather than 'We're not gonna change anything until the investigation is wrapped up.' The investigation will take years which means a lot of time that they're still using it, and a lot of time for another potential accident."

The worker commented that "what the company is doing" with its continued use of electrical detonators "is completely legal." That showed that the issue "goes much higher up," to the regulators and other authorities.

Speaking about broader issues, including the 2010 Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand, the worker said that regulators meant to enforce safety regulations increasingly appeared to be "bark and no bite, no teeth."

He noted that when severe breaches are identified, including those that result in workers' deaths, "the high-ups never really get punished. And fines don't do anything. They're never in the ballpark of what a mining company makes. It is pocket change. Whatever they have to pay out, it means nothing to them. The prospect of jail is different. If you've been negligent and it costs someone their life, you should go to prison with no ifs or buts about it. There are industrial manslaughter laws, but they very rarely get used."

He also spoke about the broader growth of corporate power. "We've moved away from the situation in the 1960s and 70s when you had public education and healthcare, and workers could afford to buy a house and have a decent standard of living. Now you have two people, and even if they are on decent incomes, they can't buy a house, and all of their resources go to feeding their family.

"It's insane where the world has gotten to. Everything is organised for a few people to make as much money as possible off the backs of all the workers. Studies have shown that if someone is earning \$50,000 a year, an additional \$15,000 could make their lives a lot better. But if someone is already on a salary of \$10 million a year, an extra \$5 million doesn't change anything at all in terms of their lifestyle.

"Twenty to twenty-five years ago, there were hardly any billionaires. Now we're talking about the prospect of the world's first trillionaire. Capitalism has gone too far."

The worker expressed appreciation for the WSWS continuing to report on the Endeavor tragedy. "You guys are the only people still covering it. Every other media company that I've seen has just moved on. They covered it for a few days and that was it. I'm glad to see that you guys are still covering it, it's really good. And your coverage is quite thorough. You're not biased to the mine. You're there for the workers from what I've seen."

He concluded: "Everyone around the town wants justice. We need to know what caused the explosion and who was responsible and make sure something like this does not happen again."

The WSWS urges workers at Endeavor and other mines throughout the region and more broadly to contact us. Break the silence of the company, the governments and the unions! Share your experiences and knowledge with us to inform the working class and prepare the ground for a struggle by rank-and-file workers to enforce safety measures and to end injuries and deaths in the sector. We will protect your anonymity.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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