

# Australian safety regulator's initial report on fatal Cobar mine explosion: more questions than answers

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The first word in almost a month from government safety authorities about the October 28 explosion at Endeavor mine in Cobar, outback New South Wales (NSW), which killed two miners and injured another, provides more questions than answers. The NSW Resources Regulator's "Investigation information release" neither explains what caused the tragedy nor makes any recommendation for how to stop more workers being killed.

The mining safety authority published the document on November 25, exactly 28 days after the incident, in line with the agency's statutory responsibilities. The regulator is not required to provide any further updates until the investigation is complete, likely years from now.

The entire process is opaque. The report gives no explanation of what investigators have examined so far, what they have found, who has been spoken to, what steps are next, or how long the whole operation is expected to take.

While the agency has taken four weeks to prepare this perfunctory document, mine owner Polymetals has not wasted a moment. With the agency's approval, the company began reopening the mine just eight days after Ambrose McMullen and Holly Clarke were killed, and fully resumed operations on November 15.

The report does not mention that the mine has been reopened, let alone explain why this was allowed when, at least according to what has been publicly stated, neither the regulator nor the Polymetals know what caused the tragedy.

Much of the report, which barely stretches to four pages, restates basic facts of the incident in little more detail than was included in the regulator's October 31 preliminary findings.

At around 3:30 a.m. on October 28, McMullen, Clarke and Mackenzie Stirling—who was injured in the blast—were setting up a ballistic disc explosive to clear a blockage in the stope, when the device unintentionally detonated.

While the regulator's October 31 preliminary report

mentioned only the ballistic discs, the latest release reveals that investigators are also looking into the detonators used at Endeavor as a possible cause of the unintended blast.

The report explains that several different components are involved in preparing these explosives. The ballistic disc's detonating cord is connected to a detonator assembly, which is then hooked up to the mains firing line with connecting wire. At the end of the shift, after all workers have exited the mine, the firing line is triggered from the surface, setting off all the charges placed.

The regulator does not explicitly say that the detonator assembly had been connected to the ballistic disc, but specifies that it had not been hooked up to the firing line and that the connecting wire was still in the workers' vehicle.

The document confirms that Endeavor mine was using older-style electric detonators, which several Cobar mining workers have raised with the *World Socialist Web Site* as a possible cause of the tragedy. These devices lack many of the failsafe features of more modern electronic detonators, which have been in common use for more than two decades.

It is known, for example, that the electric models can be set off by "extraneous electricity," including from radio frequencies generated by commonly used communications devices. By contrast, electronic detonators are designed to tolerate radio frequencies and other sources of extraneous electricity at levels well above what is safe for humans.

The release suggests that such electrical interference may have been a factor in the Endeavor incident. The regulator notes that one line of inquiry it is pursuing is "the effects of hazards associated with radio frequency (RF) from communication equipment including two-way radios, mobile phones (smart watches) and amplifiers/repeaters in proximity to explosives."

The release also indicates that the regulator is keeping the door open to a possible finding of "human error," that is, shifting blame away from Polymetals and the mining industry as a whole to the victims. The regulator states that

its investigation will examine the “instructions, training, experience and supervision provided to workers who use, handle and prepare ballistic discs and electric instantaneous detonator assemblies.”

In fact, 59-year-old shift supervisor McMullen was a highly experienced and expert worker, with extensive knowledge of explosives and a reputation for being meticulous and extremely safety conscious. He held Clarke and Stirling in high regard and had told friends they were “fantastic at their job.”

The release also refers to a fact sheet on the “Safe use and handling of electric detonators,” which outlines the many factors that can cause these devices to go off unexpectedly, including friction, impact, static electricity, heat, electrostatic current and electrical storms, as well as “extraneous electricity” from “devices such as mobile phones, electronic watches, two-way radios, Wi-Fi/mesh nodes, vehicle hotspots and Bluetooth equipment.”

The document instructs “users” that their safety relies on their awareness and successful mitigation of all of these factors, most of which are invisible and imperceptible.

As a Cobar mining worker observed, the fact sheet is ostensibly telling workers how to “safely use an unsafe product.” He was critical of such attempts, whether by the regulator or the mining companies, “to put the onus back on us as workers,” when it is the company that decides what detonators, explosives and other equipment will be used.

The worker warned that the danger of continuing to use electric detonators is only growing with time: “As technology increases and everything else is upgraded, the electric detonator doesn’t get any better with age,” but is still being used in an era when smart watches and numerous other novel RF-emitting devices are in common use.

The fact sheet was quietly published to the “library” section of the regulator’s website on November 7, not as a press release, and includes no reference to the Endeavor explosion. Both these factors seem designed to ensure that the document, and the fact that the regulator was investigating the role of electric detonators in the Cobar tragedy, were not widely reported.

The publication of the fact sheet was also partly aimed at covering the regulator’s own responsibility if a similar incident occurs again. This was also true of the agency’s October 31 warning that it may ban the ballistic disc explosives used at Endeavor and the recommendation that mines consider an alternative.

The November 25 release neither repeats nor rescinds the ballistic disc warning, suggesting that the regulator still has concerns over their safety. But while the electric detonators have clearly become a focus of the investigation the Resources Regulator has not raised the possibility of their

being banned.

In other words, neither the fact sheet nor the latest release orders, or even suggests, that mining companies change anything whatsoever about their operations, even if they are using exactly the same devices being investigated as possible causes of the death of two workers.

The absence of such a call, and the overall limited character of the November 25 document should be a warning to workers that the Resources Regulator’s investigation will be yet another whitewash, that holds no-one accountable and does nothing to improve unsafe conditions in the mining industry. This is underscored by the agency’s endorsement of Polymetals’ rapid reopening of the mine, although the investigation is ostensibly nowhere near reaching any conclusions.

The Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Workers Union have not said a word in response to the regulator’s release, just as they have maintained a complicit silence as the company has herded workers back in to the Endeavor mine. This is revealing of the union bureaucracy’s attitude to workers, not just in Cobar but throughout the mining industry. The unions’ silence is a deliberate act to suppress discussion of, and opposition to, the continued use of electric detonators and ballistic disc explosives, potentially risking the lives of countless mining workers elsewhere.

Mining workers, their families and the Cobar community can place no faith in the government safety regulator or the trade unions. The truth will only be exposed through an investigation led by Endeavor workers themselves, overseen by a rank-and-file committee. In the first instance, this committee should oppose and fight to reverse the reopening of the mine and insist that workers are paid in full for the duration of the investigation.

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.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**