

Australia: Worker killed after roof collapses at Mammoth coal mine in Queensland

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5 January 2026

One worker was killed and another injured when a roof collapsed at the Mammoth underground coal mine near Blackwater in Central Queensland on Friday afternoon. The two men were trapped underground at around 3 p.m., but while the injured man was rescued and taken to hospital that evening, 59-year-old Jeff Palmer was found dead on Saturday night.

For the mine's owner, Queensland-based multinational Coronado Global Resources, this was the second worker death in less than a month. On December 18, 63-year-old Robert White was crushed by a tractor at the company's Lower War Eagle coal mine in Wyoming County, West Virginia.

Located in the coal-rich Bowen Basin, Mammoth is part of a 256 square kilometre (99 square mile) complex, which also includes two open-cut mines, Curragh North and Curragh South, producing both thermal and metallurgical coal. While the complex as a whole began operations in 1983, the underground mine is a recent expansion, mining its first coal in December 2024. More than 2,000 workers are employed across the three mines.

While the Mammoth mine remains closed while initial investigations are carried out, the open-cut sections have now resumed operations after a brief shutdown.

An initial safety notice published yesterday by Resources Health and Safety Queensland (RHSQ) stated that "the roof collapsed while a multi bolter machine was being trammed [moved] back from the bolted face to the next work area."

A multi bolter is a heavy vehicle with several bolting arms, used underground to drill holes in the roof and install long steel rods that hold the rock together, to help stop the roof from falling. According to the notice, Palmer was "handling the bolter cable at the time of the incident."

While not making any specific findings, RHSQ noted that the roof collapse occurred "above the bolted

zone"—that is, in a section of the mine where supports had been installed—suggesting that the company's roof-support design may have been inadequate.

The safety regulator urged other operators "to review their specific mine's support design following this tragic event."

The alert notice referred to several previous bulletins, including one from 2015 cautioning against the use of 4-bolt (rather than 6-bolt) roof support patterns, noting that "the 4 bolt primary roof support pattern appears to be a consistent theme in the investigations" into several roof collapses in the Bowen Basin. Another, from 2022, noted that a batch of defective roof bolt nuts had been found and were "likely to have been used on sites."

RHSQ did not suggest that either of these prior alerts were directly relevant to the Mammoth collapse, but their inclusion in the report implies that they are among the possibilities being considered by investigators.

Underscoring the dangers faced by workers in the industry, Palmer's death was not the only mining fatality that occurred in Queensland last Friday. A 58-year-old gold prospector died after being hit by falling rocks at a private mine site at Mount Britton, about 300 kilometres (186 miles) north of Curragh.

Mining is the fourth-deadliest industry nationally in terms of raw numbers, but the third deadliest when workforce size is taken into account. In 2024, the industry had a fatality rate of 3.4 deaths per 100,000 workers, exceeded only by transport, postal and warehousing, with 7.4 per 100,000 and agriculture, forestry and fishing, with 13.7 per 100,000.

Palmer is the third worker to be killed at the Curragh complex in the past six years. On January 12, 2020, 33-year-old Donald Rabbitt suffered fatal injuries after he was crushed by a falling tyre assembly that weighed more than five tonnes.

In December 2024, almost five years later, Coroner

David O'Connell's initial report stated that Rabbitt had been directed to change the tyre alone, although the mine's standard operating procedures (SOPs) held that it should be a three-person job. O'Connell also found that Rabbitt had received no practical training for the task.

While those findings would seem to clearly indicate the responsibility of management for Rabbitt's death, the coroner also noted that the worker was trained in the SOPs. As his father, Robin Rabbitt, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), this was an attempt to blame his son for his own death.

"They're saying Donald had the right to say no," he said.

The coroner declined to hold a full inquest, claiming "there did not appear to be any prospect of making recommendations that would reduce the likelihood of similar deaths occurring."

The coroner's decision followed the abandonment of all other legal proceedings over Rabbitt's death. Following an investigation by RHSQ, Coronado, the mine's senior executive, and mining contractor Thiess were all separately charged with breaching the Coal Mining Safety and Health Act 1999, but the cases were dropped by the Office of the Work Health and Safety Prosecutor between December 2023 and August 2024.

On November 21, 2021, 54-year-old Clark Peadon, who had worked at Curragh since 2006, was killed when he was crushed by one of the "propel shoes" (moving feet) of a dragline excavator. The experienced dragline operator had been doing cable relocation work near the machine.

Three years later, Coronado was charged with failing to meet its obligation to keep workers safe. But while the offence carried a possible maximum penalty of \$689,250, the company was fined just \$80,000 plus court costs of \$28,572.78, and no conviction was recorded.

These previous experiences should be a warning to Curragh mine workers, their families and anyone else expecting that the official investigation into Friday's fatal mine collapse will reveal the whole truth about what happened or hold the company responsible for Palmer's death.

The cases of Rabbitt and Peadon are not exceptional, but reflect the typical pattern of events following the death of a worker:

- An initial statement from the relevant safety authority that a major investigation is underway, frequently backed up by politicians and union officials, who proclaim the importance of "getting to the bottom of this" and

"ensuring it never happens again."

- Government investigations or coronial inquests invariably drag on for several years, during which time no restriction is placed on the continuous operations and profits of the company, and the unions divert any opposition from workers to unsafe conditions by insisting that the regulators have it under control.

Companies are completely absolved of responsibility, or charges are dropped for procedural reasons or entirely without explanation, or, at most, a token fine is issued as a slap on the wrist. A handful of "recommendations" may be handed down, likely never to be enforced.

This same process is already underway in relation to the October 28 fatal mine explosion at Endeavor silver, zinc and lead mine in Cobar, New South Wales. While neither the company nor the state safety regulator has provided any explanation of what caused the death of 59-year-old Ambrose McMullen and 24-year-old Holly Clarke, and with major questions raised about the explosives used at the site, the mine has fully reopened, potentially placing hundreds of workers' lives at risk. The reopening has been carried out with the approval of the state safety regulator and the tacit endorsement of the Australian Workers Union and the Mining and Energy Union.

This modus operandi is not just intended to whitewash the actions of a particular company, or even dangerous practices that have become standard across an entire industry. It also serves to cover up the role played by the union bureaucracy and the regulatory agencies themselves in allowing unsafe conditions and worker fatalities to continue.

That is because these organisations serve to cover up the underlying cause of all industrial accidents—the capitalist system and the subordination of all human need to the profit demands of big business and the financial elite.

To defend their lives, as well as their jobs, wages and conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands. New organisations must be built—rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves, not highly paid union bureaucrats—to enforce workplace safety and fight for demands based on the needs of workers, not the profit interests of management.



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