

3 months since the fatal Cobar mine explosion

Martin Scott
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Three months have passed since the explosion at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor mine near Cobar, New South Wales (NSW), that killed workers Patrick "Ambrose" McMullen, 59, and Holly Clarke, 24, and left 24-year-old Mackenzie Stirling with serious injuries.

At approximately 3:30 a.m. on October 28, McMullen, Clarke, and Stirling were preparing a ballistic disc explosive device to clear a blockage of rocks when the device detonated prematurely. The explosion killed shift supervisor McMullen instantly. Clarke and Stirling were brought to the surface, but Clarke succumbed to her injuries. Stirling was airlifted to hospital in Orange, more than 350 kilometres away.

The incident rocked Cobar, where a significant proportion of the town's 3,500 residents are employed in the mining industry. McMullen, who left behind a wife and four children, and Clarke, killed at such a tragically young age, were well-loved in the community, a fact testified to by the combined attendance at their memorial services of well over 1,000.

Despite the passage of time, there is still no official explanation for the tragedy. The NSW Resources Regulator has released only a perfunctory interim report, raising more questions than it answers, and is not required—or likely—to provide any further updates until the investigation is complete. Nor does the report make any recommendations to prevent a repeat tragedy at Endeavor or anywhere else.

Based on countless previous investigations by the so-called safety regulators, it could be years before any official findings are released. The final report will almost certainly be a whitewash, covering over the company's responsibility for the explosion and calling for nothing more than a token fine and a slap on the wrist.

Despite its insubstantial character, barely stretching to four pages, the lines of inquiry referred to in the regulator's November 25 document indicate that the circumstances leading to the explosion were not unique to the Endeavor mine.

The regulator's main areas of interest appear to be the

ballistic disc explosives and the electric detonators used to set them off. Unlike many other mines, Endeavor was not using more modern electronic detonators, which have numerous safeguards against accidental detonation and are less susceptible to being triggered by electrical and radio-frequency interference.

Polymetals, meanwhile, has been allowed to proceed almost as if nothing has happened. The company began herding workers back to the mine within 12 days of the explosion on October 28. By November 15—the day after a substantial proportion of the town's population turned out for McMullen's memorial service—normal daytime mining and milling operations had resumed, with full round-the-clock operation restored before the end of the month.

While the regulator's own investigation is ongoing and ostensibly inconclusive, it allowed Polymetals to resume blasting operations on the basis of an internal review. Officially, this review also failed to determine the cause of the explosion, but was still used as a pretext for a full reopening.

However, in a December Quarter report published earlier this month, Polymetals noted of the review: "While no critical deficiencies were identified, the Company elected to implement a site-wide transition from standard electric to electronic detonators as an additional precautionary measure."

While far from a definitive statement about the cause of the fatal explosion, this comment, along with the regulator's interest in the electric detonators, does indicate the possibility that the investigations may not have been as "inconclusive" as is officially claimed.

Adding further weight to this possibility was the curious way in which the issue of electric detonators was first broached by the regulator. On November 7, a fact sheet on the "Safe use and handling of electric detonators" was quietly uploaded to the "library" section of its website. It contains no mention of the Endeavor explosion and was not issued as a press release—measures seemingly designed to ensure the regulator's interest in the

detonators was kept quiet.

Clearly, intensive discussions have taken place behind the scenes about what took place on October 28, not from the standpoint of preventing future deaths or informing workers of potential risks to their safety, but to minimise any interruption to profits for Polymetals and the broader mining industry.

The Polymetals report also notes that “several staff resignations during November” had contributed to “reduced mine output,” and subsequently “been filled by contractor staff,” suggesting that safety concerns and opposition to the rapid reopening may have prompted some workers to leave the mine.

Amid serious safety concerns among workers, their families and friends, as well as other Cobar residents, the profit-driven reopening has been enabled by a conspiracy of silence involving the unions and the corporate media.

Polymetals’ immediate response to the tragedy was to slap workers with a gag order, instructing them not to discuss the explosion or conditions at Endeavor, even with their own families.

The corporate media, after a flurry of activity in the hours and days following the explosion, had abandoned any serious coverage of the story by the end of the week. No major news outlet has reported the reopening of Endeavor, the company’s resumption of blasting, or the regulator’s November 25 release.

The Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) and Mining and Energy Union (MEU), whose officials issued empty vows on the day of the blast to “find out what happened and make sure that it never happens again,” have not uttered a word since. Their silence demonstrates their agreement with the mine being reopened with the explosion’s cause unexplained and workers, at Endeavor and throughout the mining industry, therefore at risk of a repeat event.

The unions’ response to the Cobar tragedy is no aberration. These organisations have presided for decades over countless worker deaths and serious injuries in the mining industry. Together with the so-called safety regulators, the unions work to cover up the responsibility of corporations for industrial accidents as well as their real underlying cause—the capitalist system and the subordination of workers’ health and lives to profit.

Above all, the role of the corporatised trade unions is to prevent any struggle by workers against the dangerous conditions they confront, just as they suppress the fight for real wage increases and job security.

Underscoring the phoney character of the unions and

regulators’ claims to be protecting workers, in the three months since the Cobar tragedy, at least three more mining workers have been killed across Australia, including Jeff Palmer, at Mammoth coal mine in Queensland.

This poses the urgent need for mining workers and their families to take matters into their own hands. The truth about what happened on October 28 will only be uncovered through an investigation led by workers themselves. A rank-and-file committee of Endeavor workers should be established to oversee this. As a matter of urgency, such a committee should fight to reverse the reopening and insist that workers are paid in full for the duration of the investigation.

Such an investigation would have a significance that extends far beyond the Endeavor mine or the town of Cobar. Until the real cause of the explosion is conclusively identified and rectified, countless mining workers around the world could be at risk of a similar incident.

Moreover, workers in every industry, wherever they are in the world, are being placed in danger by escalating demands for stepped-up “productivity,” at the same time as their wages and conditions are under attack. Workplace deaths are the sharpest expression of the brutal demand of big business for ever-growing profits.

Therefore, the fight for a workers’ investigation of McMullen and Clarke’s deaths must be part of a broader struggle for workers’ safety everywhere, and for a fight against the capitalist system itself.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party pledge to provide every political assistance in this fight. This will depend on workers coming forward, breaking the gag order imposed by Polymetals. 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