

Mine disaster in China: Another tragedy in the global industrial slaughterhouse

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In the worst mining disaster in China since 2009, 82 workers were killed in a catastrophic gas explosion in a coal mine in Shanxi province last Friday. Over 120 workers were hospitalised, several in critical condition, and two are still missing. The tragedy is a graphic example of the dangerous and noxious conditions facing miners and other workers around the world as their lives and health are subordinated to the rapacious corporate drive for profit.

The explosion occurred in the Liushenyu Coal Mine, which is one of four mines operated by the privately-owned Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Group, which had previously been fined for safety breaches last year. China's National Mine Safety Administration listed the mine in 2024 among 1,128 mines cited for "severe safety hazards," in this case cited for high gas levels, making it prone to explosions.

Hundreds of rescue workers who were rapidly sent to the disaster site were hampered by inaccurate blueprints of the mine layout and an understated figure for the number of workers on shift underground. Many of the workers were not equipped with mandatory location trackers. While official investigations are just underway, state media has reported that only 124 of the 247 people underground at the time of the explosion were officially logged as entering the mine. A carbon monoxide sensor reportedly triggered an automated alarm indicating unsafe gas levels but was ignored.

These discrepancies point to what is reportedly a not uncommon practice in coal mines in the surrounding Qinyuan county—the operation of unauthorised, hidden tunnels worked by uncontracted labourers without trackers to boost production and minimise taxes. Extra shafts also impair effectiveness of ventilation systems designed to remove toxic gases and prevent the build-up of an explosive gas mixture.

The death of 82 workers will impact heavily on families in the adjacent village of Shangzhuang. While miners are paid above the rural wage rate for their dangerous work, they often are the only support for an extended family. Miners internationally will recognise the dilemmas facing those in the Liushenyu mine living in a company town with few options for work and facing dismissal if they speak up about unsafe conditions. Like their counterparts around the world, the state-run trade unions in China function to suppress worker opposition on behalf of corporations and government.

Over the past 15 years, the death toll in coal mines has been dramatically reduced in China as the government has shut down illegal coal mines and tightened safety regulations. Mega-mines, many of which are state-owned, have introduced sophisticated 5G monitoring systems, robotic shearers and autonomous haulage that are more advanced than coal mines elsewhere, including in the United States, and minimize the dangers confronting miners at the coal face.

The number of fatalities in China's coal mines has fallen from thousands a year to several hundred even as production has increased. According to official figures, the death toll has dropped from 5,703 in 2000 to 228 in 2020, which is also reflected in the marked decline in fatalities per million tons from 4.12 to 0.058 over the same period.

The implementation of advanced technology and tougher regulation was not only driven by the demands of industry, but also by widespread outrage over the atrocious conditions facing coal miners and the thousands of deaths. Despite the turn to renewable energy sources, China is still heavily dependent on coal not only for energy, but also for the steel and chemical industries, and accounts for more than half of annual global coal production.

Shanxi province holds roughly a quarter of the

country's coal reserves and is a key producer of coking coal necessary for steel-making. While the province has some 370 "intelligent" mines using the latest technological advances, many more, including the Liushenyu Coal Mine, remain heavily reliant on manual labour.

The response of the Chinese government to last Friday's explosion only highlights its fears that the high death toll will provoke anger not only among mine workers but more broadly in the working class. President Xi Jinping immediately urged no effort be spared to save lives and dispatched Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing to Shanxi to oversee rescue operations. Both Xi and Premier Li Qiang directed authorities to investigate the explosion and prosecute those responsible.

However, the state media has focussed its attention on the culpability of mine management rather than examine the role of the regulatory authorities at the local and provincial levels. However, many of the hundreds of thousands of posts that have burgeoned on Chinese social media are asking the obvious question: Why was the mine permitted to continue operation given its inherent dangers and previous safety breaches?

Underlying this tragedy is the relentless drive under capitalism for production and profits above all else, including the lives of workers. What has been unleashed on the Chinese working class with the systematic restoration of capitalism by the Chinese Communist Party over the past 40 years is what faces the working class internationally.

Around the world, mine workers are especially vulnerable due to the inherent dangers of the industry. Despite employing only about 1 percent of the global workforce, it accounts for more than 8 percent of all workplace fatalities worldwide.

The deadliest disaster this year occurred at the Robaya mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. More than 600 workers were killed in two mine collapses—the first on January 28 and a second on March 4. The mines account for over 15 percent of the world's tantalum supply.

However, mine deaths regularly take place not just in more technologically backward regions but also in major capitalist countries. Two miners died last week in the United States in separate incidents: a 25-year-old mechanic Preston Pollard was crushed to death in an open cut Kentucky coal mine when heavy equipment fell on him; and 34-year-old Zachary Wolfe was killed in a fall in an underground coal mine in Pennsylvania.

In one of the worst coal mining disasters in decades, 29 coal miners were killed in a massive explosion in the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia on April 5, 2010. While four separate investigations found that the tragedy should have been prevented, no one has been held accountable at the Massey Energy-owned mine.

Fifteen years ago, an explosion ripped through the underground Pike River Coal mine on the remote West Coast of New Zealand's South Island trapping 29 workers. Rescue operations were called off after a second explosion. A royal commission of inquiry found that Pike River Coal, which was deep in debt, had flouted basic health and safety regulations, but again no one was held accountable.

Whether in China, the United States, Africa, New Zealand or any other place in the world, miners face similar dangers and political issues. Without taking matters into their own hands, workers cannot wage a fight for their lives and health against the combined forces of management, governments and the unions.

This poses the necessity of forming independent workers rank-and-file committees in every mine and workplace in every country as part of workers' control over production and also of safety. The International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been formed on the initiative of the ICFI to enable workers to share information and coordinate their struggles across different industries and internationally, overcoming the national barriers enforced by the unions.

Above all, what is required is a unified struggle by workers in China, the US and globally to abolish the root cause of such disasters—the profit system itself—and the rational reorganisation of production on a socialist basis. We urge workers in China and every country to take up this fight and to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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