

Mine disaster exposes grim reality facing Chinese workers

Peter Symonds
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The tragic deaths of at least 82 workers in last Friday’s gas explosion at the Liushenyu Coal Mine in Shanxi Province has exposed the brutal face of capitalist exploitation in China. Details slowly emerging from official investigations point to systematic flouting of safety regulations in mines in the drive for production and profit.

The state-owned Xinhua news agency has revealed that the privately-owned mine operated by the Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Group had “hidden” shafts mined by outsourced and unregistered contractors. Of the 247 workers in the mine at the time of the explosion, 123, or nearly half, were not carrying mandated location trackers and were not logged as being underground, which can only indicate large-scale and unsafe illegal operations.

Mining corporations such as the Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Group resort to such methods to evade regulations that place upper limits set for each mine on production and the number of miners on any shift. By doing so, the mine owners not only increase output, which is sold illegally, but also avoid taxes on coal extraction. The hidden shafts are, of course, not subject to the same safety requirements as other areas of the mine.

In the case of the Liushenyu Coal Mine, management maintained two separate sets of mine plans—known colloquially in Chinese as “yin-yang drawings”—a false one for inspectors to examine and the actual mine blueprint needed for daily operations that was kept hidden.

When tipped off about an inspection, the hidden shafts were simply covered up. According to news agency Xinhua, the mine “used wire mesh and woven plastic sacks sprayed with mortar, to make fake doors that looked very much like the rock wall of the mine tunnel.” Whenever inspectors came, the doors would be

shut and smeared with coal ash as a further disguise.

Hidden shafts had to be worked by hidden workers—subcontracted labourers who were not logged on the official entry record and were not provided with required-location trackers. The falsified mine plans and shift numbers, as well as the lack of location trackers, clearly created major problems for rescue teams and contributed to the high death toll. Many of the deaths and injuries were not just immediately from the blast but were the result of suffocation and toxic gas inhalation.

The Liushenyu mine was listed by China’s National Mine Safety Administration as one with “severe safety hazards,” in particular high gas levels, making it prone to explosions. The operation of additional hidden shafts would have only added to the danger of an explosion.

Li Weiqian, a local miner with a decade of underground experience, told the *South China Morning Post* that hidden working faces severely compromise the fixed airflow volumes designed to act as vital safety barriers. In other words, the ventilation system designed for safe working and to prevent the build-up of an explosive mixture of gases is unable to cope with the additional load imposed by hidden shafts.

“The ventilation standards are firmly established when a coal mine is approved,” Li said. “If an illegal working face and extra roadways are secretly opened inside, the required airflow is split, making it much easier for methane to accumulate to explosive levels.”

While the state-owned media has focussed attention on the illegal activities at the Liushenyu mine, the details released so far raise more questions that they answer. The most glaring question is why the mine was able to continue large-scale illegal operations at all.

Clearly miners and their families knew what was happening and were told to keep quiet or face

dismissal. The wife of a miner from a different company told the *South China Morning Post* that several of her friends had died in the blast. She confirmed that many had worked in “hidden” coal pits.

Xinhua blandly reported that in 2025 the Liushenyu mine operator was “fined after regulators discovered concealed working faces, but the penalty failed to serve as an effective deterrent, and the company continued illegal production.” But if that is the case, one can only conclude, given the scale of the illegal operations, that authorities simply ignored what obviously had been taking place for some time and was continuing.

Moreover, it is not simply a matter of an isolated rogue operator. A miner surnamed Liu who works at the Liushenyu mine told the *South China Morning Post*: “Unauthorised tunnels are not uncommon in [the surrounding] Qinyuan county’s coal mines. I’ve worked in six mines, and at least two of them had unauthorised tunnels within their mining areas.”

China’s National Mine Safety Administration (NMSA) is well aware the illegal mining operations are widespread and has done little or nothing to end the practice or other unsafe operations. “A senior mining supervision official” told the *China Daily* in 2024, as new safety regulations were being announced, that some grassroots governments “turn a blind eye” to illegal activities in coal mines within their jurisdictions, “even providing protection.”

Wu Hongbao, a retired mine manager, told the *South China Morning Post* that the gas explosion at the Liushenyu mine pointed to a systemic safety failure. “China’s gas regulation system is fully networked from the county and city levels all the way up to the national level. The Shanxi mine had clearly breached a dangerous threshold, yet no one noticed. This points to severe failures in its safety management,” he said.

The only reason that what are undoubtedly widespread unsafe practices have come to light is because of the scale of the tragedy at the Liushenyu mine. It simply could not be hushed up at the local level, and given the potential for widespread public outrage and anger, President Xi Jinping decided to step in with what will inevitably be a more sophisticated cover-up.

Xi immediately urged no effort be spared to save lives and dispatched Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing to Shanxi to oversee rescue operations. He ordered a full

investigation of the explosion, the prosecution of those responsible and a review of national mine safety. Executives of the Shanxi Tongzhou Coal Group have been detained. Many of the coal mines in the surrounding Qinyuan county have been closed pending inspection.

The National Mine Safety Administration went through the motions of issuing an internal document on Sunday, urging the mine to “fully close loopholes in gas control and effectively guard against and defuse major safety risks.” As reported by the *South China Morning Post*, it called for stepped-up inspections through covert checks and surprise raids to “severely crackdown on and rectify” illegal and irregular practices, such as miners entering shafts without personnel positioning cards or operators exploiting hidden, unapproved working mine faces.

Like governments and their various agencies globally in the face of terrible disasters, the Chinese Communist Party bureaucracy is putting on a show of concern and ordering investigations and inspections whose primary purpose is to identify convenient scapegoats while leaving the underlying processes of capitalist exploitation and profiteering intact.

A final point needs to be made about the grim reality facing workers in China, as revealed by the Liushenyu mine disaster. The official annual death toll in the country’s coal mines has dramatically fallen over the past decade from thousands to a few hundred. It is certainly true that the introduction of sophisticated 5G technology and automated systems as well as the closure of small, illegal mines have been factors.

However, if half of the workforce at the Liushenyu mine can be compelled to work unregistered in unregulated hidden shafts, and the practice is widespread in the coal industry, then how many other deaths have not been included in the official toll? How many workers not on the company books, bodies buried in disused shafts or elsewhere, and co-workers bullied into silence?



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