

Australia: 1 year since the fatal Cobar mine explosion

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Wednesday marked one year since an explosion at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor silver, lead and zinc mine near Cobar, in far west New South Wales (NSW), killed shift supervisor Patrick "Ambrose" McMullen, 59, and charge-up operator Holly Clarke, 24. A third worker, Mackenzie Stirling, then 24, was seriously injured.

Twelve months later, the families, friends and colleagues of McMullen and Clarke still have no official explanation for how and why their loved ones were killed. No one has been held responsible. The mine has been allowed to continue operating and is now ramping up production.

For Polymetals, the workers' deaths have already been relegated to the past. In January, the company claimed its internal review had found "no critical deficiencies." Its September quarter report, released on the eve of the anniversary, makes no reference to the explosion, instead celebrating a "transformative" year taking the company from "restart to revenue."

For the small, tight-knit mining community of Cobar, with a population around 3,500, the explosion was a major traumatic event. Around 40 percent of the local workforce is directly employed in mining, while many more depend on the industry. The devastating impact was underscored by the vast attendance of memorial services for McMullen and Clarke last November.

In the days and weeks after the explosion, workers and residents told the *World Socialist Web Site* of their shock, grief and anger. They raised serious concerns over Polymetals' rush to reopen the mine before the cause of the explosion had been established, and described the fear confronting families whose loved ones continued to work underground.

One miner's wife told the WSWWS: "It is very frightening for workers and their families when they don't know why this happened. Everyone needs answers."

A year later, answers are still not forthcoming.

That gives the lie to all the official declarations of concern that followed the explosion. The past 12 months have been characterised above all by a concerted effort by the company, the NSW Labor government, the safety regulator and the mining unions to suppress the questions raised by the disaster, dampen down the anger and concern in Cobar and ensure that the extraction of profit continued uninterrupted.

In a token statement noting the anniversary, NSW Labor Natural Resources Minister Courtney Houssos said nothing more about the NSW Resources Regulator's investigation than that it "is ongoing and will be released publicly when complete."

The status of the investigation has not changed publicly since November 25, when the regulator published a four-page interim report. That perfunctory document established little more than was already known: At around 3:30 a.m. on October 28, 2025, McMullen, Clarke and Stirling were preparing a ballistic disc explosive to clear a blockage of rocks when the device detonated prematurely.

The report confirmed that Endeavor was using older-style electric detonators and identified their vulnerability to electrical and radio-frequency interference as one line of inquiry. But no restrictions were placed on Polymetals, nor on the use of similar technology at other mines.

Houssos is not a disinterested observer—she is the minister in charge of the Resources Regulator, responsible, along with the Labor government as a whole, for directing its investigations, which are inevitably protracted whitewashes.

The tone for the entire official response was set by NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns immediately after the disaster. Addressing Australian Workers Union (AWU) delegates, Minns declared: "We can't stop all accidents on work sites, and we can't promise that. No responsible government can do that."

One year later, this has effectively been the guiding principle of the entire official response. The deaths of workers are treated as an unfortunate but unavoidable accompaniment to mining, while nothing—not even an unexplained explosion that killed two people—is permitted to interfere with production and profit.

It was on this basis that Polymetals began reopening Endeavor just eight days after the explosion. Within weeks, full operations, including blasting, had resumed. Workers had been instructed not to speak to anyone, including their own families, about the explosion or conditions at the mine.

Cobar workers and residents who spoke to the WSWWS opposed the rapid reopening, questioning how the mine could be declared safe when nobody knew what had caused the fatal explosion. An experienced shotfirer opposed reopening before

the investigation was complete, while another worker described the decision as reckless.

Such concerns were suppressed by every other outlet and political tendency. The corporate media rapidly abandoned the story. The unions said nothing, giving their tacit blessing to the reopening.

The Mining and Energy Union (MEU) marked the anniversary with a perfunctory social media post that did not even name McMullen and Clarke. The NSW Mine Workers Alliance (NSWMWA), a joint operation of the MEU and AWU launched in Cobar in 2024, posted a barely modified version of the same statement. The AWU, of which McMullen was a member, issued no public anniversary statement.

Just days after the explosion, on November 1, 2025, the WSWs warned that, whatever professed “concerns” the MEU and AWU officials had over safety, “their overriding concern is ensuring workers stay on the job and there is no organised opposition to the deadly conditions in the mines.”

The article explained, “The role of these organisations is 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.”

The ensuing year has demonstrated precisely this. The unions did not oppose the reopening, the resumption of blasting while the cause remained unknown or the company’s gag order. Their role has been to prevent the concerns and anger among Endeavor workers and the broader Cobar community from developing into an organised challenge to continued production.

To the extent that the union bureaucracy intervened at all, it was to direct workers’ concerns back behind the official investigation and regulatory apparatus. Even its anniversary statement merely declares that the investigation “is ongoing and the exact cause is yet to be formally determined,” without a word of criticism that this remains the case after an entire year.

The unions seek to further divert attention by claiming the fundamental problem is that safety standards in NSW metalliferous mining “lag behind the coal industry,” where statutory union safety officials exist.

This is a fraud. The supposedly superior regulatory regime in coal mining has not prevented workers from being killed in the sector almost every year. Five coal industry workers were killed on the job in 2024, and at least three more so far this year.

The issue is not the absence of another union official incorporated into the regulatory apparatus, but workers’ lack of independent control over safety and production.

Since the Endeavor explosion, at least nine more workers have been killed in Australian mining. Nationally, Safe Work Australia recorded 222 workplace deaths in 2025, the highest toll since 2012.

But the significance of the Cobar anniversary cannot be reduced to another statistic in this grim national toll.

What has happened over the past year provides a concrete demonstration to workers of who and what they confront.

Two workers were killed and another seriously injured. Their colleagues and families demanded answers. Residents questioned the safety of reopening the mine. Yet production was restarted within days, before the cause was known. The company silenced its workforce. The regulator permitted operations to continue. The Labor government defended the existing framework. The unions suppressed any independent mobilisation of workers. Twelve months later, the families and the community still have not been told why McMullen and Clarke died.

The lesson is that workers cannot entrust their lives to any of these institutions.

Endeavor workers, together with miners throughout Cobar and across the industry, need their own organisations—rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracy and controlled by workers themselves—to fight for the release of all information relating to the explosion and for workers to exercise genuine control over workplace safety.

Such committees must enforce the right of workers to halt production wherever they consider conditions unsafe, without loss of pay or threat of victimisation.

Above all, the experience of the past year demonstrates the irreconcilable conflict between workers’ safety and a system in which every decision is ultimately subordinated to production, “productivity” and corporate profit.

The deaths of Patrick “Ambrose” McMullen and Holly Clarke must not be allowed to disappear into another interminable official investigation while business carries on as usual. The defence of workers’ lives ultimately requires a political struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, including for mining companies, along with other major corporations and the banks, to be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class as part of the socialist reorganisation of economic life.

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