# Australia: Todd Russell, Beaconsfield mine disaster survivor, dies aged 54

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Todd Russell, who was rescued alongside fellow miner Brant Webb from Tasmania's Beaconsfield gold mine in 2006 after 14 days trapped almost a kilometre underground, has died aged 54. He is survived by his wife, Donna, and three children.

Russell's death, announced by his family on November 10, came after a prolonged illness. Earlier this month, he announced that he was leaving Launceston General Hospital after eight and a half months to spend his remaining days at home.

Twenty years on, Russell's death recalls the extraordinary courage of the trapped workers and all those involved in their rescue, but also the unresolved social questions behind the disaster.

At 9.23 p.m. on Anzac Day, April 25, 2006, a magnitude 2.3 seismic event brought down rock on the 925-metre level of the mine. Larry Knight, 44, a father of two, was standing outside the telehandler the three men were working from and was killed. Russell, 34, and Webb, 37, were in its cage, which was half-filled with rubble but held up the slab above them. Fourteen other miners working at a lower level got out.

Knight's body was found two days later. Russell and Webb were presumed dead until April 30, when they were found alive. They had survived on a single muesli bar and water seeping through the rock. Rescuers then spent days drilling and blasting a tunnel through hard rock, a slow and dangerous operation in which further rockfalls could have killed everyone underground. In the early hours of May 9, the two men finally walked out. That afternoon they attended Knight's funeral.

The rescue drew an extraordinary response from working people across Australia and internationally. Miners in the US and Germany who had themselves been entombed sent messages of support.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: "It was such basic human considerations that drove the team of highly skilled rescuers. They worked unstintingly and painstakingly around the clock for two weeks, in extremely dangerous circumstances, to reach the two survivors—not for material gain but through a deeply-felt desire to help out their fellow workers."

The subsequent coronial findings established a crucial fact: The seismic event was induced by mining activity—it was not a natural catastrophe. But the findings also established something more damning: The company had known of the danger since at least 2003 and had chosen to ignore it.

In October 2005, a rockfall brought down approximately 400 tonnes of material at the mine, in a tunnel less than ten metres above the area where Russell and Webb were trapped.

The company relied on a ground support design that the coroner found unsuited to the mine's crumbling rock. Of six consultants who gave a view on it, only one firmly endorsed it. Yet the company kept it in place after the October 2005 falls.

The motive was not hard to find. Around $20 million worth of gold was ripped out in the three months to March 2006, with at least 461,000 ounces remaining to be mined—a deposit worth more than $400 million at then-record gold prices.

The driving force was Macquarie Bank. The investment bank had first draw on profits, having bought Beaconsfield Gold's intercompany debt of $77 million for just $300,000 in 2002. It had the right to withdraw finance if the mine's budget or cash shortfalls blew out by more than 15 percent for two consecutive months. Miners were shown a production chart and warned that if yields fell below a red line they would lose their jobs.

Webb testified that miners were constantly pushed to increase production and told by management, "We are under the pump from Macquarie Bank." Minutes of a shift supervisors' meeting just five days before the April rockfall showed supervisors were told the mine was "behind in production" and that work in stope 925 was "priority one" to meet tonnage targets. As one supervisor testified, production was "flat out" because the ore yielded a "filthy" 1,200 grams of gold per tonne.

The 2009 coronial findings were the third inquiry into the disaster—yet not one company or government figure was held to account. Coroner Rod Chandler conceded that the company's failure to conduct a risk assessment was "glaringly obvious" and "not satisfactorily explained," and that the decision to resume mining without it had not been "satisfactorily explained." He nevertheless concluded that he could not "positively" find that Knight's death would have been avoided had an adequate risk assessment been undertaken—only that the likelihood "would have been reduced, perhaps significantly."

The WSWS described the findings at the time as a whitewash and "an affront." What was "glaringly obvious" was that the company avoided a risk assessment, ignored expert recommendations and resumed production in stope 925 because it contained one of the richest veins in the mine. The coroner's equivocation—that a proper risk assessment might only have "reduced" the likelihood of death—was the legal formula by which a company that had knowingly gambled with its workers' lives was absolved of responsibility.

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The state Labor government was equally culpable. Tasmania's self-regulation regime, introduced in 1998 to attract investment, permitted mine management to decide whether rockfalls were serious enough to report. Budget cuts had left the inspectorate, Workplace Standards Tasmania, with only two inspectors—"grossly inadequate" and "incapable of carrying out its core functions," in the coroner's words.

The government's own closed-door inquiry, headed by barrister Greg Melick, operated under terms drawn up with the Minerals Council and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) that excluded any examination of self-regulation. Melick conceded that further seismic events had been foreseeable and that better ground support might have reduced the chances of the rockfall. But the company was not held responsible in the inquiry's August 2007 findings and the mine was allowed to resume full production by December.

The AWU played a filthy role. Its then national secretary and later Labor Party leader, Bill Shorten, claimed that after the October 2005 collapse the union had "sought and received assurances" from the company that workers would not be sent back until conditions were safe. As the WSWS noted at the time, this position "beggars belief": "The only guarantee the union sought for the safety of its members was the word of the mine owners themselves."

Shorten then compounded the betrayal by musing that he was "curious to know how much the directors of the company actually know about the mining methods"—a formulation that let the owners off the hook. The AWU was actively complicit, working to ensure the mine's reopening and to avoid any examination of its own role in allowing production to continue after the October rockfall.

This is the practice of the entire trade union bureaucracy: Subordinating the interests of workers—up to and including their health and lives—to those of the employers in the name of making Australian companies "internationally competitive."

For the corporate media, the rescue was also a lucrative commodity. More than 200 journalists descended on the small town of Beaconsfield. Television networks competed for exclusive access, with Channel Nine reportedly paying over $2.6 million for interview rights and doubling its advertising rates to $100,000 for a 30-second spot. A journalist even offered rescue workers money to smuggle a video camera down the mine, endangering the operation.

Russell later described the personal cost of that exposure. Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2024, he recalled reporters hanging over his fence and the prolonged invasion of his privacy. "You went to work as a normal person," he said, "and you come out of there with your identity lost."

He spoke openly about his psychological distress and eventually seeking professional help, highlighting that his ordeal did not end when he and Webb finally walked out of the mine.

The Beaconsfield disaster is one among many demonstrating that mining workers cannot entrust their health and lives to governments, safety regulators, or the trade unions, whose role is to whitewash workplace deaths and injuries and cover up their real cause: the capitalist system.

This is only possible because of the complicity of the corporate media: The swarm of reporters that engulfed Beaconsfield when the rescue of Russell and Webb was a major international story have no interest in exposing the profit-driven processes that led to them being trapped underground in the first place.

The price for this ongoing cover-up is paid by the working class. According to Safe Work Australia figures, at least 162 mining workers were killed on the job in the 20 calendar years from 2006 to 2025, plus at least nine this year. Across all industries, an average of 197 workplace deaths occur each year.

On October 28 last year, an explosion at Polymetals Resources' Endeavor mine in Cobar, New South Wales, killed two workers—Ambrose McMullen, 59, and Holly Clarke, 24—and seriously injured a third. The company reopened the mine within days, with the blessing of the state safety regulator and the unions, although even now, more than a year later, there is no official explanation of what occurred.

Ending the scourge of workplace deaths and serious injuries requires that workers take their safety into their own hands. That means building rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, in every mine and workplace, through which workers can halt unsafe operations without losing their income, obtain independent technical advice where necessary and insist that production is only resumed when conditions are safe.

Russell's death is a devastating loss to his family, friends and community. His courage, public honesty about his suffering and his 31 years of service as a volunteer firefighter should be remembered. So too should Larry Knight and the workers who risked their lives in the rescue. Honouring them requires a fight for conditions in which no worker's life is subordinated to profit.

This means a fight against capitalism itself, and for a workers' government to carry out a socialist program: The mines, along with other key industries and banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that production can be organised on the basis of the needs of the working class, including for safe, well-paid jobs, not the ever-growing profit demands of the wealthy few.

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