

MODERN SLAUGHTER HOUSES: SOUTH AFRICAN MINES

The mining industry has become very notorious for killing mineworkers at a shocking rate.

In the first twenty days of this year, 30 mineworkers had been killed in accidents. Over 550 workers were injured in the same period.

Victims of mine accidents have since rocketed.

If this guillotine is not stopped there is a great possibility of losing 1000 miners this year.

In 1987 alone 753 mineworkers lost their lives in mine accidents and over 10 000 were injured.

The latest report from the Government Mining Engineer tabled in parliament shows that 675 workers died in mine accidents in 1990.

The Chamber of Mines (COM), the main employer of miners, was responsible for 602 deaths last year.

On average 10 000 mineworkers are hospitalised for more than two weeks each due

to accidents on the Chamber mines.

At this rate, one mineworker dies and 18 are seriously injured for each ton of gold they produce.

A mineworker who spends 20 years working underground risks being killed in 30 chances and half of his working time he is facing the danger of being permanently crippled.

What lies behind this carnage is the mine bosses' health and safety policy of maximum profits at all costs.

It is the known motto of the COM that mineworkers have to work in places even if they are not safe.

Instructions are loud and clear - work first and complain later - or else face dismissal.

All calls made by the NUM for a commission to look into mine safety have fallen on deaf ears.

Since 1963 no commission of inquiry was ever instituted.

Mineworkers are seen by the mine bosses as cheap tools which can be used without much

regard to their safety.

With hundreds of thousands of unemployed in the rural areas of South Africa and neighbouring countries, those who die can be easily replaced.

One captain of the mining industry put their policy crisply when he said: "You can't have an omelette without breaking the eggs."

For the mine bosses, the death of mineworkers at work is part of making profits.

The worst disasters to hit mineworkers are:

* 1909 at Wits gold mine 152 workers were killed;

* 1960 Coalbrook mine caved in killing 437 mineworkers;

* 1969 at Buffelsfontein 60 mineworkers were killed;

* 1983 at Hlobane coal mine 68 mineworkers were killed;

* 1986 at Kinross gold mine near Secunda 177 died when a fire broke out underground

The major killers of workers are the rockbursts. Added to this, mineworkers face a

battery of killing agencies:

explosives, electrical shocks, machinery, trucks, tramways, falling materials and a host of others.

Rockbursts are regarded as unpreventable by mine bosses. Technological methods developed internationally to minimise casualties of such accidents are not used as these will reduce profits.

It was in line with this policy that the COM research budget was cut from the proposed R70 million to R40 million last year. Only about R30 million is budgetted for 1991.

As if all this was not enough, victims of mine accidents are dismissed on the recommendations of mine doctors.



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ANC calls for a Health Charter

The African National Congress, in a recently published document, calls on the people of South Africa to draw up a Health Charter expressing their wishes on a democratic health system.

The document, which advocates basic health principles, represents a radical departure from the current apartheid health care system.

In its preamble, the document declares:

* that for people to be healthy, it is necessary that families have enough money for a decent life;

* that workers should work in safe conditions that do not make them sick;

* that people need decent family housing, clean water to drink, and enough food to eat.

The document further states that there must be decent toilet facilities and proper dis-

posal of rubbish.

It goes on to state that people's health will be improved when they have a reasonable standard of education, and when there are opportunities for rest and recreation.

The document also commits itself to, amongst others:

* the promotion of good health;

* the creation of a comprehensive National Health Service;

* Intersectoral co-operation, that advocates a single Ministry of Health and Social Services that work in close co-operation with other relevant government departments;

* Financing of health care which should be the responsibility of the government;

* A national medicines policy;

* Personnel policy to address racial and gender injustice in the training of health workers.

The government has failed to correct this appalling situation through legislation.

The current legislation is totally inadequate and biased against mineworkers. The Mines and Works Act fails to provide for union involvement in health and safety such as independent inspection rights, election of own safety representatives, rights to information and the establishment of bargaining forums.

As long as the Chamber of Mines and the government refuse to establish a national forum to address this appalling state of health and safety in the mining industry, the situation will never show any significant improvement.

The challenge facing mineworkers is to struggle for a complete overhaul of the present health and safety system in the mining industry. This is a national problem and has to be addressed by any democratic government with a progressive health policy.