1960

Both workers and peasants in China suffered from the ambitious and unrealistic targets for agricultural and industrial production set during the Great Leap Forward. While much has been written about how farmers ended up neglecting agricultural production for the sake of smelting steel in backyard furnaces—contributing to the famine that killed tens of millions of people—the impact the Great Leap had on workers in other sectors is less well known. This essay explores the toll this campaign took on the safety and wellbeing of workers in the coal mining industry.

Workers' Peril in the Workers' State: The Laobaidong Colliery Disaster

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In 1960, well over 650 miners lost their lives following a massive explosion at the Laobaidong (老白洞) colliery in Datong, northern Shanxi Province.[1] This was China's second-worst mine disaster, and the fourth-worst in world history.[2] Both the leadup to and the aftermath of the disaster reflected the limited importance of workers' welfare in China's political economy.

Anatomy of a Disaster

At 1.45 pm on 9 May 1960, an electric spark in the underground area where coal wagons were parked ignited a large amount of accumulated coal dust, causing a huge explosion. The first sign for those aboveground came when a wall of smoke and fire exited Shaft Fifteen with the power of a force-twelve typhoon, destroying the facilities at, and anywhere within 2,000 metres of, the mine entrance. Workers queuing to start their shift down Shaft Sixteen were killed or injured when they were blown away by a wall of air. Underground, many workers were killed by the blast or when the roof fell in. The explosion also closed down the ventilation systems, allowing poisonous fumes to circulate, which, as in most similar mine disasters, suffocated many miners.

The authorities moved promptly to organise a rescue effort. Although the most experienced local rescue teams were out of town helping at another mining disaster, in Baotou, the remaining two teams quickly arrived, going down the mine within half an hour of the explosion but finding it difficult to make progress because of rock falls, fires, and smoke. At 5.15 pm a well-intentioned but disastrous decision to turn the ventilation system back on in fact fanned the fire underground and distributed poisonous smoke throughout the mine. Although rescue teams had established bases at the bottom of Shafts Fourteen and Fifteen, by 11.15 pm they had all been forced to leave the mine. At 11.50 pm a plume of smoke and 15-metre-high flames spurted out of Shaft Sixteen and cut off an escape route for miners who were still trapped. At 12.30 am the next

day, the ventilation equipment was turned off and early that morning a new rescue attempt was made.

In total, 912 workers were underground at the time of the explosion. A group of thirteen was rescued late on 9 May and a further 104 around midnight. The last thirty-six survivors were brought out on 13 May. By 16 May it was decided that no-one could still be alive underground and, late the following day, the mine entrances were sealed. In all, 228 workers were rescued, five of whom later died. A total of 669 workers were killed underground. The official death toll was 684, though the Deputy Minister of Coal later suggested that more than 800 people may have died.[3]

Within an hour of the explosion, the leaders of the Datong Coal Bureau, which ran Laobaidong, arrived at the mine, followed within a day by senior officials from the central and provincial governments. The leaders in Beijing were notified and Premier Zhou Enlai kept Mao Zedong informed. The Ministers of Coal and Labour were summoned from a meeting in Hainan to provide oversight. Deputy Premier Luo Ruiqing assured the mine authorities that the Centre would provide whatever they needed, and more than 1,000 troops, including some equipped for chemical warfare (and therefore able to work through the poisonous gasses in the mine), were sent to Datong, as were rescue teams from leading mines across northern China.

At the first sound of the explosion, miners' families had begun to congregate at the mine. Despite appalling scenes of distress, the authorities assigned guards to keep the crowd away, lest they impede the rescue effort. As bodies began to be brought out, heartbroken relatives had to identify their loved ones, sometimes just by the clothes they were wearing. Because the weather was warming up, rural families, who took longer to reach the mine, sometimes arrived only after their relatives had to be buried. The authorities found a site suitable for a mass grave, burying many bodies there; others were taken back to their ancestral homes for burial. Yet others, including the mine manager, were not found until more than a decade later, leaving their families with no focus for their mourning and no grave to visit at the Qingming festival.

No Random Accident

This disaster was no random accident. Rather, as Ben Harvey writes: 'Mining disasters provide snapshots of society exposed and forced into action.'[4] Its causes lay deep within China's political economy, reflecting the

Party-State's adoption of an extensive development model that increased production by expanding the quantity of inputs, and in particular the extreme version of that model practised at the height of the Great Leap Forward (1958–60).

After 1949, the newly established Party-State took measures to promote the welfare of its workers, in the process 'remaking' China's working class as a—somewhat privileged—status group dependent on the state.[5] As part of worker welfare, there was at least a rhetorical commitment to work safety. As the Chief Engineer of China's state mines wrote in a 1990 retrospective of the industry: 'After 1949, the working class became the masters of the country, and coal safety was given a high priority.'[6] From 1953, the government established work-safety institutions on the Soviet model at national, regional, and local levels; by 1955, ten major coal regions and twenty-seven mine areas had established safety inspection organs.[7] Indeed, the official statistics from the early 1950s show a sharp fall in coalmine death rates from the very high figures for 1949–50, when the country had still not recovered from the chaos and disruption of the Civil War and the new safety measures had not yet been put in place.[8]

When concrete decisions had to be made at the basic level, however, the extensive development model limited the privileges that could be granted to workers and, even for union officials, safety often had a lower priority than other pressing needs.[9] In general, poorer countries aiming for rapid development and industrialisation have to make difficult choices when allocating resources, and often in practice give a low priority to work safety.[10] Even in the Britain, in what W. G. Carson described as the 'political economy of speed', the imperative to develop the North Sea oilfields in the 1970s led to the sidelining of safety and a high price paid in workers' lives.[11] So, at Laobaidong, when the mine was reopened in 1954 after having been closed during the Civil War, financial constraints and the state's urgent need to develop coal production meant the mine failed to implement key safety requirements, with, for example, Shaft Fifteen doubling as both a winding and a ventilation shaft.[12]

Problems accelerated during the Great Leap Forward, when the extensive mode of development was carried to extremes and widespread political fervour and repression prevented any questioning of policy. Central to the movement were ambitious and unrealistic targets for production and, under the slogan 'steel as the key link and coal supporting steel' (以钢为纲以煤保钢), coal mining played a crucial role. The 1959 target for coal production was 380 million tons—close to three times the

output of 1957.[13] However, this mode of development ran into internal contradictions as any slack within the economy became exhausted and, by May 1960, when the Laobaidong disaster occurred, the extensive methods used to develop production in the industry had reached their limit, and coal output started to decline.[14]

Nationally, the Great Leap Forward led to a work-safety crisis in the coal-mining sector and beyond.[15] Mines were forced to cut corners to meet ever-higher targets. Despite rhetorical commitments, in practice, work safety was downgraded in a drive for production at all costs, with the slogan 'safety first' (安全第一) denounced as a manifestation of dogmatism.[16] Using the military terminology common during the Great Leap, foreign minister Marshall Chen Yi compared the movement to a battlefield and said fatalities were inevitable: 'Casualties have indeed appeared among workers but it is not enough to stop us in our tracks. This is a price we have to pay, it's nothing to be afraid of.'[17] The official statistics unambiguously show the cost in miners' lives. The number of workers killed in Chinese coalmines increased from around 600 in the mid-1950s to more than 6,000 in 1960, while the death rate in large state-owned mines (of which Laobaidong was one) increased from around four per million tons to almost fourteen in 1960, and was still eleven in 1961.[18] In other sectors, almost four times as many workers died annually in state and collective enterprises in the years 1958 to 1961 than during the First Five-Year Plan (1953–57), while in the construction industry the death rate in 1958 was more than three times that in 1957, with 117 of the 435 fatalities occurring through the collapse of buildings brought about by shortcomings in construction. The railways similarly experienced an increase in deaths during the Great Leap Forward and a sharp spike in 1960.[19]

At Laobaidong, the prioritisation of production was reflected in a blind push to increase output. The mine's installed capacity was 90,000 tons but already by 1958 it was producing way over that amount and the 1959 and 1960 targets raised the planned output to almost 150,000 tons. Overcapacity production is a major source of risk in coal mining, and this augured badly for safety at the mine. High and unrealistic targets for production by each shift meant that workers were often forced to work multiple shifts to try to reach their quotas. Just as in many areas of rural China, the cadres used the supply of ration tickets to browbeat workers into undertaking excessive shifts.[20] The day of the disaster, 9 May, had itself been scheduled as a 'high production day'.[21]

Under these circumstances, safety very explicitly came second. The Datong Mine Party Committee proclaimed to a workers' meeting: 'Production is the aim, safety the means. Where there is a contradiction between production and safety, we have first to obey the needs of production.'[22] At the same time, the department in charge of mine safety was downgraded.[23] Numerous unsafe practices rooted in the need to increase production were seen at Laobaidong. Large amounts of coal dust, sometimes up to 30 cm deep, were allowed to accumulate in the passageways. Even if it had been operating, the sprinkler system was unable to deal with so much dust. Moreover, the prohibition on welding underground was lifted and the frenzied atmosphere even allowed welding contests to be conducted within the mine.[24]

The imperative to increase production also led to the dilution of the workforce with large numbers of new, untrained workers who were often not properly registered with the mine management. These workers were less aware than experienced miners of the safety requirements. While in 1955 the mine's workforce was 1,978, by 1960, it had increased to 6,994, some 1,126 of whom were hired without going through the regular procedures. Management almost totally lost the ability to regulate labour, to the extent that workers who did not have suitable arrangements at home would take their children down the mine, where they could look after them, or bring their parents or other relatives sightseeing underground.[25]

The treatment of the survivors and the bereaved families also signalled the limits to worker welfare. The state did not attempt to abjure all responsibility, as did coal owners in nineteenth-century Britain or the United States.[26] Surviving workers were allocated to suitable jobs that they could manage despite their injuries, and widows were given preference in the recruitment process for appropriate positions. But, as in the Britain, the amount of monetary compensation paid was pitifully inadequate. The families of the dead were granted an allowance of 12.50 yuan per month (8.50 for rural residents).[27] Although later reports said these amounts were reasonable in light of the country's economic difficulties, they are unlikely to have been remotely enough to support livelihoods given the average miner's wage was about 60 yuan per month.[28]

Attributing Responsibility

The politics of the Great Leap Forward and of the Party-State in general contributed to the disaster and also prevented serious analysis from

which future generations could learn. Before the disaster, those questioning unsafe work practices were denounced as rightists. One old worker was aware of the risks, having experienced an explosion while working in mines in Manchuria, but he nevertheless did not dare to refuse to go underground.[29] When he did go down the mine, he carefully noted escape paths and, after the explosion, guided fellow workers to a safe place where they could await rescue.

After the disaster, an investigation by a small group set up by the central authorities and led by the Ministers of Public Security, Labour and Coal, and the head of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions turned into a search for saboteurs and counterrevolutionary elements accused of triggering the explosion. The failure by the mine leadership to take this possibility into account was denounced as a lack of the spirit of 'politics in command'.[30] Workers who had been due to go on shift but for various reasons had not, or who had fled back to their home villages in fear after the disaster, were under suspicion, as were the technicians in charge of safety, electricity, and transport. Although the official report one year later found no link between counterrevolutionaries and the explosion, large numbers of workers and cadres suffered demotion or worse. In all, 709 people were struggled against, 398 cadres were replaced, and 462 'impure elements' (不纯分子) were transferred away.[31]

As with other aspects of the Great Leap Forward, the Party's response was to lay blame on local officials. At a meeting shortly after the disaster, the Minister of Coal pounded the table and shouted at mine officials: 'You should apologise to the people. So many dead, how can you justify yourselves? Have you no Party spirit, no conscience!'[32] The eventual official report also focused just on the immediate causes of the disaster, such as lapses in safety measures and in management, which was described as 'chaotic' (混乱), and identified mine managers as responsible.[33] A further report in 1963 likewise merely discussed the immediate causes and laid responsibility on officials at the Coal Bureau; the 'correct leadership of the upper levels of the Party' had led to the rapid development of the mine, but mine leaders had made key mistakes.[34] Even the local officials themselves blamed their own excessive enthusiasm, rather than the external pressures they were under: 'Our brains burned with enthusiasm for increasing production, management and safety provisions just could not keep up.'[35] No doubt those in the know could read between the lines and understand what had happened, but it was hardly an open and objective analysis of the causes of the disaster.

In fact, the chaos was not just local. As Xu Daben, then Vice-Minister of Coal, found when he visited other key mines in northern and northeastern China, it was general, even universal.[36] Crucially, however, no-one dared mention the policy settings or the ideological environment that created the chaos. At Laobaidong, one widow in the heat of the moment said: 'God damn it. Great Leap Forward, Great Leap Forward, a minute late down the mine won't do, they will only be happy when they have Great Leaped us to death.'[37] During the late 1950s, Minister of Labour Ma Wenrui recalled saying to a workers' meeting, 'This isn't a Great Leap Forward, it's a Great Leap Backward', though some scepticism about this recollection is probably warranted.[38] In general, however, criticism of the broader policies was virtually impossible and, as with the even more serious famine in rural areas, local officials—rather than Mao and the central leadership—were held responsible.[39]

Finally, except for one possible mention in a provincial government document published in late 1960,[40] information about the disaster was designated 'top secret' (绝密) by the leadership and there was no media coverage. In contrast, in China in the 1990s and 2000s, investigative journalists played a prominent role in raising consciousness of work safety and of the needs of those whose lives were destroyed by disasters.[41] Likewise, in Europe, press coverage and parliamentary inquiries in nineteenth-century Britain created pressure to improve safety and to better compensate the families of killed or injured workers, while in France a series of reports on the 1906 Courrières disaster allowed miners to voice demands for a safer work environment.[42] But, while in the Britain and France such press reports and the documents produced by public inquiries stimulated public discussion by providing rich detail on mining disasters (even though coroners' hearings and inquiries sometimes failed to uncover the real picture), in China, state control over the press has deprived the public of that detail for Laobaidong and, to a lesser extent, for more recent mining disasters.[43]

Unearthing Laobaidong

After the beginning of the reform period, restrictions on reporting were gradually relaxed and, from 1982, there were occasional brief references to the Laobaidong disaster in articles on work safety, in the *Labour Yearbook*, in the official gazetteer of the provincial coal industry, and in a speech by the Minister of Labour.[44] From 1992, the writer He Yuqing

started to research the disaster, completing that research in 1998. Four decades after the explosion, excerpts of this first detailed account were published in several journals, including *China Coal News* (中国煤炭报), a daily newspaper published by the Ministry of Coal and its successors, at last bringing it to public attention.[45]

For a long time, this lack of transparency inevitably constrained any attempts to learn from, and to some extent even to understand, what had happened; in the short term, the managers at Datong just maintained their focus on increasing production.[46] Nevertheless, the disaster was an important factor behind the resuscitation of safety institutions in the early 1960s, under the slogan 'safety first'.[47] But politics intruded again during the Cultural Revolution, when those institutions were again dismantled. As a result, there was a steady increase in the death rate in large state-owned mines, from around four per million tons in the mid-1960s to over seven in 1970, though the increase was less marked than during the Great Leap Forward, and there was greater variation between provinces.[48] In fact, work in China's coalmines continued to be extremely perilous into the early twenty-first century, though from around 2003, China started to dramatically improve its record, by 2019 reducing the recorded death rate to 2 percent of what it had been in the early 2000s.[49]