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Organizing to Get Results

Major Changes in Mining Methods: the Need to be Proactive in Defending Jobs and Health and Safety

- André Racicot -

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What comes to mind is the environment in which we operate, which is that of underground mines, a very different environment from that of surface or open pit mines. To be more precise, it is the question of stabilizing the bedrock within the underground mines which always concerns us as miners. There have been incidents of underground mine drifts collapsing. A drift is the horizontal underground passageway that follows a vein of ore. There are also rock bursts -- large pieces of rock that suddenly break off -- and seismic events. All of these things are interrelated.

The Westwood mine whose workers I represent is located, like many gold mines in Abitibi, along the great geological Cadillac-Larder fault which stretches over 300 km between Abitibi and Ontario. To extract the gold-bearing ore you have to dig a mine shaft and drifts at very great depths. We're talking here about 2,000 to 3,000 metres underground.



This is why miners, as they open up a mine drift, make sure to always consolidate the walls and ceiling of the rock face within the mine drift with anchor bolts and wire mesh. In this construction, they follow the drawings and specifications prepared by the mine engineer.

To excavate a mine drift, the miners drill holes in what is called the working face, a vertical surface of the bedrock, which are then filled with explosive charges. During these operations, the miners probe the rock and watch for changes in the properties of the rock, which could be a sign of danger such as a rock burst. The miners use a scaling bar to hit the rock face and can detect, just by the sound made by the rock, if any rocks or parts of the bedrock may break loose.

We often hear about the enormous pressures that exist deep in the oceans. It's the same with mining:

the rock at great depth is under tremendous pressure and all this energy stored in the bedrock can be released suddenly when miners dig tunnels and mine drifts to reach a gold bearing vein. It's called a "rock burst" when the rock breaks up and explodes.

At Westwood mine we have witnessed five major rock bursts. In the most recent, last October 30, three mine drifts collapsed and the rock bursts caused seismic tremors that reached 3.7 on the Richter scale. One worker was trapped underground for thirty hours.

The health and safety of workers is of great concern, particularly with regard to underground mines.

It is clear that mining methods are set to change.

Currently the mining companies are talking about replacing teams in the mine drifts by one miner alone operating a drilling machine with an armoured cabin to open the working face. I believe this kind of operation would be dangerous in a seismically active zone because I'm far from being convinced that an armoured cabin would resist a major rock burst.

More and more, the union and the prevention representatives will object to doing the work that way. We will demand that operations be done remotely from the surface in seismic zones.

We are demanding that workers' exposure to risk be reduced. This means more remote operations, more remote control of operations to avoid exposing workers to risks.

The companies say that it will be a matter of a job transfer, that the jobs will still be there, but instead of heavy machinery operators the workers will be carrying out remote operations. In unionized mines like ours, we will be able to retain our workers. In the non-unionized mines, the employers will get rid of the miners and management will be in charge of remote operations.



We are closely monitoring all of these changes. We have filed a proposal that there be a regulation requiring that these operations be done remotely at the mine site. Employers are raising objections to this. They argue that already at the Arcelor Mittal open-pit mine in Fermont, on the Quebec North Shore, huge 200-ton trucks that transport iron ore are driverless and are remotely controlled by operators whose workstations are located in Longueuil, 1200 km away. The operation could well be done in another country, in India, in China, anywhere. We are very concerned, because if this happens, how can we ensure that the training of workers is adequate. It is important that the operator be at the mine site so that health and safety regulations that we have fought for for a long time are enforced, not to mention the regulations that we managed to put in place at the mine. If we file a complaint with the Labour Standards, Pay Equity and Workplace Health and Safety Board (CNESST), they will tell us that they do not have jurisdiction when remote operations

are carried out in another country. We have already sent the CNESST a letter expressing our concerns about this new developing situation. Until now, the CNESST has not seen fit to answer our letter. What we want to ensure is that with the introduction of these new technologies, the health and safety of workers comes first. We want to protect our jobs and our health and safety at those jobs.

Miners should receive the necessary professional training in order to face this new reality. At this time this is not happening. Steelworkers have made representations on this issue for things to change. I am on the advisory committee of the Val d'Or School Board which has a vocational program (Diplôme d'études professionnelles) in ore mining. I am alerting them to this new situation so that the young people who will become miners in the future are trained to be able to deal with the introduction of automated and remote-controlled machinery in mines.

An essential mechanism for ensuring compliance with health and safety standards is the prevention representative. I know this from having been one for 25 years. Our prevention representatives are appointed by the workers. They act proactively to investigate and detect problems before they become sources of danger to miners and they defend the miners when their health and safety is put at risk. Their role will become even more important with the changes taking place in the mining sector.

We are facing a new era in mining operations which requires that the next generation be well prepared to defend jobs and the health and safety of all workers.

(Photos: CUPW. Translated from original French by Workers' Forum)

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