

There's nothing accidental about these disasters

Mining disasters have been happening for centuries, as if working in the entrails of the Earth demands human sacrifices. Michael Quinlan's book questions the fatalism with which this slaughter is sometimes viewed. It analyses mining disasters in five highly developed countries: Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

It is almost 30 years since the young Australian sociologist Michael Quinlan first went down a coal mine at Pike River, New Zealand. During the 1980s he carried out research in collaboration with the miners' trade union in the state of Queensland (Australia). He was able to assess the work of the inspectors appointed by the trade union to protect miners' safety. The trade union gave him access to all of its records. He presented an initial analysis based on this field work in 1986 and, since then, his interest in questions of health and safety in mines has not waned.

Michael Quinlan has become one of the world's most renowned specialists in this field. He uses working methods that value the collective experience of miners and their trade unions. He has served on various commissions of inquiry in Australia and New Zealand.

In November 2010 a new disaster resulted in the death of 29 miners at Pike River. The youngest of them, Joseph Dunbar, had had his 17th birthday the day before. It was his first day working in the mine. Quinlan played an important role on the commission of inquiry set up by the New Zealand Government to look into the causes of the disaster. The two volumes of the detailed report published by the commission in November 2012 led to

a strengthening of the legislation, despite an unfavourable political context.

Quinlan has identified 10 pathways contributing to disasters. The actual design of mines, organisation of production and errors made in the selection of methods and maintenance play an important role. In the case of Pike River, the decision to make use of the hydraulic extraction method, which uses the power of water jets, had been taken without being accompanied by adequate infrastructures. As the mine was exploited, unforeseen difficulties appeared but they were not resolved owing to the financial pressure to make the installations profitable as quickly as possible. The mine management seemed to have total confidence in the technology. Its own position in the allocation of work led it to ignore the alarm signals coming from the miners. Management systems are often deficient while risk assessment is inadequate. Complaisant audits are unable to rectify such errors. Economic pressures play a central role. Sometimes financial difficulties result in safety being neglected. In other cases, the desire for a quick profit from installations and the pressure piled on subcontractors to meet deadlines cause disasters. At Pike River, bonuses were distributed to the miners on the basis of productivity. This system got in the way of prevention. The role of state inspections should not be ignored. In Australia surveys have shown that the inspectorate is loathe to stipulate precise measures and tends to favour self-regulation by companies. Miners often express worries prior to disasters. Nobody listens. Management believe that they know better than the workers and do not implement effective communication

systems. The outcome of disasters is made worse by the inadequate resources to deal with emergency situations.

This book has the merit of not isolating disasters from the daily reality of working conditions. As the author states, although disasters attract the attention of the media, public and governments, they are a distraction from the fact that the greatest number of deaths are caused by accidents occurring during the normal course of production. The author stresses the underlying political dimension in any discussion on improving prevention. Clearly written and with an obvious knowledge of the technical questions, this book provides a review of the predominant themes in the field of safety at work.

— Laurent Vogel

Ten pathways to death and disaster. Learning from fatal incidents in mines and other high hazard workplaces

by M. Quinlan,
The Federation Press,
Sydney, 2014

By the same author: Road haulage in Australia: keeping vulnerable workers safe and sound, HesaMag, 6, 2012.