Europe’s coal industries: not dead yet

Coal mines are not just found in history books. Although doomed to extinction due to their catastrophic impact on the environment, they remain a reality in several European countries. *HesaMag* wanted to see what work was like in a coal mine and get to know the views of trade unionists working in the sector. We found a mixture of pride in a mythical trade, denial of the negative effects on the miners’ personal health and the environment, and sometimes naive trust in technical solutions and pacts with the sector’s employers. Nevertheless, the views of these miners take on a different sense when regarded alongside the photos featured in this report.

Mathieu Glowacki and Sébastien Gobert
Collectif Daleko & Blisko (https://dalekoblisko.com/)

Photos by Sadak Souici, Agence Le Pictorium
See the full photo reportage by Sadak Souici at www.etui.org

Miners in Spain, Poland and Ukraine: all equally disillusioned.
"Are Europeans really the champions of the energy transition? Or are they idiots when compared to the Chinese who continue to use cheap coal? I get the impression that the drive to decarbonise the European economy is hypocritical: ‘clean’ statistics are achieved through closing down our mines, while at the same time ‘dirty’ coal is being imported from third countries like Morocco or Colombia.” Rubén García is bitter. From his office, the Secretary General of the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) union within the state-run mining company Hulleras del Norte S.A. (Hunosa) in Oviedo, Spain, watches over “the death of coal”, powerless to do anything against it. The move will result in the closure of dozens of mines and the elimination of thousands of jobs. From its peak of 50 800 workers in 1985, the Hunosa headcount has dropped to less than 1 000 today.

The phenomenon is common to the whole of western Europe. Coal was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the 19th century. It was the pillar of the west’s economy until the onset of restructuring in the 1970s-1980s. It should not be forgotten that the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was the forerunner of what is now the European Union. With its centre in Oviedo, the Asturias mining region was one of the richest regions of Franco’s Spain in the 1970s. For a long time flourishing on the backs of a downtrodden labour force, as described by Émile Zola in his epic novel *Germinal*, the mining sector was also an epicentre of industrial struggles and workers’ movements for a whole century.

The European Union’s target to reduce GHG emissions by 40% in relation to 1990 levels between now and 2030 sounded the industry’s death knell.

The many posters and stickers in Rubén García’s office remind visitors of the golden days of a proud working class, but also of the general strikes which had the country shakings at its knees from the 1980s onwards. What followed was an irremediable decline, in Spain just as in France and Belgium. For profitability reasons and in the wake of its transition to a service economy, western Europe closed down its mines one after another, often under dramatic circumstances. The target of the European Union, as a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement, to reduce GHG emissions by 40% in relation to 1990 levels between now and 2030 sounded the industry’s death knell.

And yet, coal still accounts for 15% of the EU’s total energy production. According to the European Commission, coal-fired power stations in the 27 EU Member States employ 53 000 people, while the mines employ 185 000. The mines in Germany and Poland are the most active, supported by modern technologies and improved working conditions. But two-thirds of these coal-fired power stations are earmarked for closure between now and 2030.

However, even if the European Union manages to do without coal, it will remain very much in use on the continent, if only because Russia is one of the world’s main producers. Although committed to Europeanising its economic structures, Ukraine remains dependent on coal, which accounts for 35% of its energy mix. The mines there operate under conditions no longer seen in the rest of Europe.

The packages offered to the workers affected by the closures of December 2018 avoided a social tragedy, with thousands of miners benefiting from generous early redundancy deals. “But it remains a tragedy for the working conditions are optimal.” 32 years old, Jesús Sanchez bears the badges of these bygone times.”

"It’s a great pity to have to speak of everything in the past tense," says Jesús, an employee of the Hunosa mine in the village of Aller for the past three years. “These days, working as a miner is no easy job, but,” he goes on to say, "the working conditions are optimal." 32 years old, Jesús Sanchez bears no resemblance at all to any character from *Germinal*. A miner today earns around 1 600 euros net a month. Workers use state-of-the-art safety equipment, including breathing masks and methane detectors, and receive regular medical check-ups.

The phenomenon is common to the whole of western Europe. Coal was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the 19th century. It was the pillar of the west’s economy until the onset of restructuring in the 1970s-1980s. It should not be forgotten that the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was the forerunner of what is now the European Union. With its centre in Oviedo, the Asturias mining region was one of the richest regions of Franco’s Spain in the 1970s. For a long time flourishing on the backs of a downtrodden labour force, as described by Émile Zola in his epic novel *Germinal*, the mining sector was also an epicentre of industrial struggles and workers’ movements for a whole century.

The European Union’s target to reduce GHG emissions by 40% in relation to 1990 levels between now and 2030 sounded the industry’s death knell.

The packages offered to the workers affected by the closures of December 2018 avoided a social tragedy, with thousands of miners benefiting from generous early redundancy deals. “But it remains a tragedy for the region,” says Enrique Moreno, a 43-year-old "pensioner" from the Santa Lucia mine. La Robla, the town where he lives, has lost half of its population in the last ten years. "I don’t want my children to put down roots here, without any prospects for the future," he admits. He laments the "bad use" of European funds which have not fulfilled their purpose of restructuring certain mines.
But even if the European Union manages to do without coal, it will remain very much in use on the continent, if only because Russia is one of the world’s main producers.

"There are still at least six million tonnes of coal waiting to be mined at Santa Lucia, but that will never happen now," remarks Jesús Sanchez. "Even so, coal could still have a future. We just need to take some radical decisions to transform the industry or to reduce pollution from coal-fired power stations."

The Ukrainian mines: of vital importance for the country, but "left to fare for themselves"

Few miners would be familiar with the term "painless" in Ukraine. While knocking on the EU’s door, the country maintains a mining tradition built on the suffering and precariousness of its workers. Stakhanov, the town where Soviet propaganda in the 1930s said to have extracted 227 tonnes of coal in a single shift, is now under the control of the Donetsk People’s Republic, a Russian-backed, self-proclaimed and non-recognised secessionist state belonging to Ukraine. The war raging there since 2014 has cost more than 13 000 lives and divided the Donbass mining region.

The Polish mining sector: in decline but still state-supported

Similar views have been fuelling a national debate in Poland, where coal is a raw material presented as an indispensable element of the energy mix. Coal-fired power stations still produce almost 80% of the country’s electricity. In 2016, the mining sector employed more than 85 000 people. While the sector has gone through a series of restructuring measures and closures, with the 416 000 people employed in the seventy mines back in 1990 now nothing more than a distant memory, its decline has been partly compensated by constant injections of cash by the state.

In this gloomy landscape, the Belchatów mine, two hundred kilometres southwest of Warsaw, is a veritable enclave of prosperity. The coal mined here is lignite, or "brown coal". Accessed via open-pit mining, it is a lot more profitable to extract, but also much more polluting. Belchatów is the largest open-pit mine in Europe and is directly linked to a coal-fired power station considered to be one of the most powerful in the world. It has a production capacity of 5 500 MW, equivalent to six nuclear reactors, and produces 20% of the country’s electricity. Visiting the Belchatów mine is like being beamed into a science fiction film set: the main pit is six kilometres long, three kilometres wide and 310 metres deep. It’s like a lunar landscape, a desert of earth and coal, a mix of beige and brown. The seven excavators are massive steel monsters, each weighing 7 500 tonnes, 77 metres high and 200 metres wide and each with a 30 000-volt appetite. Showcasing the Polish mining sector, the whole mine bristles with state-of-the-art technology.

As with everything in the mine, the excavators run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Yet they only need five miners to operate them: two drivers and three technicians. Ever since its start-up in 1977, the Belchatów mine has had a track record of progressively replacing manpower by machine power. As a result of the growing mechanisation, the headcount has dropped from 12 500 in the 1980s to 4 700 today.

"The greatest threats for the miners are the rotating machines, the height and high voltage," says Roman Fryś, an organisation and management specialist. "But even so, accidents are very rare. The last fatal accident dates back to 2002. You’re more likely to have an accident driving an off-road vehicle than mining coal. As for occupational diseases, they are virtually non-existent." In this respect, the mine is a model and has won safety awards several times.

In the same vein, the budget earmarked for health and safety is constantly increasing, a fact welcomed by trade unionists. Ryszard Fryś and Zbigniew Matyśkiewicz are the president and vice-president of Solidarność, the union well-known for its fight against the Communist regime in the 1980s. They confirm that, whether in terms of working conditions or social benefits, the miners are very fortunate: 2 000 euros a month in wages (twice the average Polish wage), a generous works council, and agreements with the best hospitals in Poland for free treatment.

Above all, they have an agreement guaranteeing long-term employment and no redundancies until 2027. "All this is the fruit of a long union struggle, but a struggle always based on compromise and without conflict," stresses Fryś, recalling that the last major strike took place back in 1994. "But we’re not talking about privileges here. The company is doing well financially. As trade unionists, we have always put the company’s financial health before all other considerations."

This culture of compromise and economic rationale is the hallmark of the Belchatów unions. Accomplished by simply not replacing retiring employees, the necessary restructuring induced by mechanisation has been painless from a social point of view. Here again, in comparison to the historic mining basin of Upper Silesia, the Belchatów mine is an exception.
While knocking on the EU’s door, Ukraine maintains a mining tradition built on the suffering and precariousness of its workers.

Ukraine has lost control of 70% of its mines, in particular the ones producing anthracite, the coal with the highest energy density. All that the country has left are sixty-five state and private pits, divided between the Donbass and a region in the west along the Polish border. The sector employs more than 120,000 people. In contrast to their European colleagues, they do not benefit from the work standards in force in the European Union.

“The average monthly wage is 12,000 hryvnias, equivalent to 400 euros,” states Yevhen Marousenko, secretary of the independent union of Ukrainian mineworkers (NGPU) at PivdenDonbaske-1, a state-run mine some thirty kilometres away from the front line. “These days, our pay arrives on time, but that wasn’t always the case.” In Ukraine, it is the private sector that offers the best working conditions – to be precise, the conditions in force in the European Union.

None of the miners we meet at the coalface have a breathing mask or suitable boots. “Safety conditions? We’ve got safety in our genes!”, says head of safety Petro Antoniouk with aplomb. “Our fathers and grandfathers all worked in the mines. If their safety codes were OK for them, then they’re OK for us as well.” Nevertheless, everyone is aware of the lung diseases and accidents their fathers and grandfathers suffered from and which are also a cause for concern for the new generation. “We’re prepared to apply European safety standards,” chief engineer Yevhen Hratchov assures us. “The problem is, however, that there’s no money to finance this transition.”

Coal accounts for more than 35% of Ukraine’s energy mix, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). And despite the low wages and terrible working conditions, mining remains a career option for young workers, explains trade unionist Yevhen Marousenko who doesn’t understand the government’s strategy of negotiating contracts for importing coal from South Africa, the United States, Poland or even Russia, a country still considered as an aggressor state.

The ministry was suspected of resorting to an easy option, saving it from costly investments. “That’s work for at least another 25 years.” Facilities at PivdenDonbaske-1 are however in a bad shape, suffering from a chronic lack of investment. In the galleries, the wooden and steel pit walls are crumbling away. The shaft lifts taking miners more than six hundred metres down into the ground all date back to the 1970s.

“None of the miners we meet at the coalface have a breathing mask or suitable boots. "Safety conditions? We've got safety in our genes!", says head of safety Petro Antoniouk with aplomb. "Our fathers and grandfathers all worked in the mines. If their safety codes were OK for them, then they're OK for us as well." Nevertheless, everyone is aware of the lung diseases and accidents their fathers and grandfathers suffered from and which are also a cause for concern for the new generation. "We're prepared to apply European safety standards," chief engineer Yevhen Hratchov assures us. "The problem is, however, that there's no money to finance this transition."

Coal accounts for more than 35% of Ukraine's energy mix, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). And despite the low wages and terrible working conditions, mining remains a career option for young workers, explains trade unionist Yevhen Marousenko who doesn't understand the government's strategy of negotiating contracts for importing coal from South Africa, the United States, Poland or even Russia, a country still considered as an aggressor state. The ministry was suspected of resorting to an easy option, saving it from costly investments in the mining infrastructure. According to Yevhen Marousenko (NGPU), however, "the longer you wait with investments, the higher production costs will get, thereby making our coal less profitable."

From Ukraine to Spain, these are the political and strategic questions preoccupying those working in the sector, much more than working conditions or climate change. At Belchatów, Mr Matyskiewicz reports that the political climate promoted by the European Union and the decarbonisation of the economy were seen as threats by the employees. "If the price of a tonne of CO2 gets too high, our mining will cease to be profitable. We are also going to fight to get the government to give us the green light to open a new pit extending the mine's life by a further 20 years." The Belchatów mine currently has coal reserves lasting until 2035. In 2018, it extracted a record quantity of 44 million tonnes of lignite.

In 2017, the share of electricity generated within the European Union by renewables reached 30%, exceeding that of coal for the first time. But, like Poland, certain countries are only planning a slow energy transition. This is all the more true for Ukraine, the victim of a deadly war and outside the EU’s legal and economic scope. The working conditions and standards of miners, workers formerly at the forefront of economic and social progress, are greatly dependent on the national context. Many miners continue to believe in a coal-based future. As Rubén García from the CCOO in Oviedo underlines, “the development of CO2 capture and storage techniques could give us back the possibility of exploiting this inexpensive local resource.” The unionist goes even further, saying that “this could be a technology we could export to China, Morocco and Russia. This would benefit us all, and the environment as well.” This vision, however, is not necessarily the most shared within the current European context.
From the unions 5/9
From the unions 6/9
From the unions 9/9