



## On the Wa Yaobao Mine Disaster

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Another tragedy occurred in another mine in China this weekend. The death toll at the Wayaobao coal mine in Shaanxi Province rose to 30 people by Monday, May 1—"May Day". It may rise further as more bodies are recovered.

5,986 coal miners died in 3,341 accidents last year, accounting for roughly 80 percent of the world's mining deaths.

In a report released at the beginning of this year, China Labour Bulletin found, "Statistics ... suggest that there was a slight but significant improvement in coal mine safety in China in 2005, but deconstructing the aggregate figures in that report shows that bigger disasters happened more frequently and killed two to three as many people compared with the previous year."

Is this progress? The government has hired more inspectors and closed more mines. It has raised the compensation that must be given to accident victim's families. It has disciplined higher and higher ranking officials for accidents under their jurisdiction. And it has ordered local governments to divest from private mines.

A more fundamental change is needed. Growth must be redirected toward basic human needs, not flashy industrial parks and dazzling GDP figures.

The Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao government's commitment to a balanced, "scientific" model of development is commendable in this regard. So too is the recent decision by the National People's Congress to end mandatory growth targets for local officials. Efforts to include negative externalities like environmental pollution in provinces' calculation of GDP are also promising.

But growth must also be made more democratic. Workers must be given a real voice in their enterprises.

Worker-led inspection teams in mines are one option. The extension into private mines of Staff and Workers Representative Congresses (which have the power to vet management decisions) is another. Freeing up the All China Federation of Trade Unions to negotiate vigorously with mine bosses on behalf of workers is yet another.

The communities surrounding mines must improve, too, if mine conditions are to improve. More engaged, clean governments and sound, beneficial policies in rural areas will leave fewer workers desperate enough to risk their lives for coal cash. Strengthening village elections and raising elections to the township level could bring more popular input into local development decisions and reduce corruption.

Avoiding more disasters like this one will require a comprehensive and daring approach to reform.

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