

# THE ROLE OF A MINERS' OFFICER IN OUR CHANGING INDUSTRY

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For several years now myself and many other Miners' Officers from each mine have had the pleasure of attending these conferences. We have all heard many and varied papers on all subjects pertaining to Safety in our Industry, from implementing systems to new variations in equipment and research and services available to the industry. Most papers have been academically based and presented by people with vast experience and qualifications in their respective fields. Most of this information has been of great use to us as Miners Officers and many ideas and systems have been used in our own workplaces or parts thereof to improve the quality of our working environment and equipment and our attitudes toward safety.

I propose to present this paper from a grassroots level because basically that's where many of our Safety problems occur. I wish to show how a local Minesite Miners' Officer can be used to advantage by both the management and workers of a colliery to improve the Safety & Welfare of all employees by being a *prevention* against adverse *reaction* as the conference theme signifies and helping to implement ideas and procedures and systems to the mine. We all know that from smooth and effective transitions of such, Safety will improve and of course a flow on of this is increased production.

## **HOW IS A MINERS' OFFICER APPOINTED?**

The Coal Mining Act 1925 - 1981 states in section 70 part (1):

*The workmen employed in any mine may appoint two of their number or any two persons, who are or who have been practical working miners and have had not less than five years experience of underground work, to inspect the mine, and the persons so appointed shall be allowed, at any time on giving notice to the manager, to go to every part of the mine and go inspect the shafts, roads, levels, workings, air-ways, ventilating apparatus, old workings, and machinery and appliances. The persons so appointed shall be designated "Miners' Officers".*

Also in part (5) it mentions that

*reports are to be recorded in the record book before going to the Manager or Inspector*

Part (6)

*The Miners Officer shall have power to suspend all operations in any dangerous place until such place has been certified by an Inspector to be safe.*

Past history has shown that sometimes these powers were used rather periously. There would be a disagreement over a safety issue between the workforce and management and the Miners Officer would be called in to have a real blue by using the powers of the legislation. This is REACTIVE to Safety. In these times of change within our Industry we should endeavour to be PROACTIVE and by effective use of Miners' Officers, solve Safety problems before they start.

## **BASIC PROBLEMS**

A basic problem in all mines is communication, we hear it every day. How many incidents and accidents have occurred through poor communication? Also, another problem is to get people to accept new ideas especially when it is a complete change from what has been an age old practice handed down from our forefathers.

Traditionally there has been quite a lot of hostility by men to management and vice versa - what has been phrased the "us and them" mentality. Miners have often viewed the Manager as an alien whip cracking Fuhrer. Was this or is this still the perception at your mine? If so I'm sure you have problems and likewise does the Management view the worker at your mine with contempt? Does he view him as a beer swilling moron with caveman mentality? If this is so, we have bigger problems.

## **FORMAL USAGE OF THE MINERS' OFFICER**

Let us look at the ways in which we can break down these barriers and get the workforce and Management to accept each others ideas. We must first give ownership to all Safety issues and anything pertaining to Safety to all parties and have them involved. This can be done by the formal use of Miners' Officers representing the workforce and their ideas on:

- Safety Committees
- Risk Assessments/Safety Management Plans
- Formulating Safe Working Procedures
- By joint Accident Investigations
- Inspections with Management

You can use not only their basic coalface working experience and knowledge, but also by the Miners' Officers sourcing ideas and information from all their fellow workmen. Mineworkers like to be involved in issues affecting their Health & Safety and their views can be relayed through the Miners' Officer.

Let us look at these parts individually:

- *Safety Committee Members*:- The Workforce will confront the Miners' Officer almost everyday with all kinds of issues and problems regarding safety. Some are not always relevant or pertain to the duties of a Miners' Officer but if each are handled by personally taking charge or directing it to the proper area, be it to an engineer in charge of a department, Undermanager, Safety Co-ordinator or even a Section Deputy, this is much easier as a member of the Safety Committee as you have formal access to all areas. We find that at our mine not all the problems presented to us are from miners or tradespersons but also from management, who are finding it difficult to find a solution to a safety problem or finding it difficult to have a new concept accepted by the workforce. Quite often the reasons behind these difficulties is because there is not enough conciliation between the parties. Some of these problems can be sorted out by the men alone without taking it further and becoming an argument with Management. The Safety Committee is an excellent forum for resolving these problems.
- *Risk Assessments/Safety Management Plans*:- Your Miners' Officer should always be a member of risk assessment teams as well as a minesites qualified relevant engineers, mining department and Safety personnel. Persons need to be trained in Hazard Identifications and Risk Assessment process as well as competent in Risk Assessment facilitation. This will benefit both the company and the workforce because the Miners' Officer possessing the knowledge and skills of the facilitation process makes it more acceptable to the workforce. Risk Assessments are not always done correctly but can be done for an outcome and be manipulated by people on the task. If the Miners' Officer holds these skills and are involved then credibility and acceptance is greatly enhanced.
- *Safe Working Procedures* may be required because of the introduction of new equipment or from new or changing hazards identified in the work place. They are quite often a spin off from Risk Assessments and once again the

relevant parties should be utilised to formulate these using all their technical and practical skills together.

- *Accident Investigations* should be carried out by the Safety Officer, any mining or engineering personnel if required and the Miners' Officer. If it is a serious incident the Inspectorate will also be involved. The Miners' Officer can be very useful, especially when taking statements as workers can sit down and relate in a more comfortable manner with us than people of higher authority such as management or the Inspectorate.

The Miners' Officer has the power to preserve the accident site if the company is not co-operative and this can only cause longer delays than are necessary. At the scene of an accident the Miners' Officer may pick up more basic facts than management because of their daily hands-on working experience and knowledge of equipment and the environment. What happens in reality may be different to the workshop manual because of many factors affecting plant and machinery and the hands on operator could probably pick these anomalies which may have been a contributing factor to the accident.

Inspections by a Miners' Officer are able to be carried out under the Coal Mining Act. These are most effective if done in the company of a Mine Official. If this is not possible, the Miners' Officer should sit down and discuss any problems arising from such inspection with the relevant Department Official i.e. mining, electrical or mechanical and between them should find the best possible solution that is acceptable to all parties and with the least interruption to production without compromising Safety.

Forced compliance rarely works, agreement and conciliation is the only way to get respect and compliance at the minesite.

Miners view Safety issues differently to some managements, but we are not answerable to company executives or bean counters we are only answerable to ourselves and our families. Mineworkers look very pedantically at Safety problems. There was once written a quotation by "Publilius Syrus" who said "*He is safe from danger who is on the guard even when safe*"

I believe this says exactly the view of all mineworkers and hopefully in our changing industry managements will always share a mutual sympathy. I'm not saying as Miners Officers we believe we are always right, but by laying the cards on the table and taking the best ones from each side we must all finish up with a better hand.

## **GAINING RESPECT**

A Miners' Officer has to gain respect from management, mineworkers and the Inspectorate to carry out his job properly and correctly. But how can this be done?

A good Miners' Officer should first have a full knowledge of the Coal Mining Act. Also the manager's rules at his mine and have a practical working knowledge of all areas of his mine. To be able to fulfil all duties as a Miners' Officer effectively the person elected must be prepared to undergo training and do research and upgrading of their knowledge on many aspects of our industry pertaining to safety.

When making decisions they must be impartial and not politically motivated and for no personal gain. If a Miners' Officer shows any favouritism he will lose respect and credibility from the workforce and management.

If the decision is to improve his own standing with the men or the company he is committing professional suicide and its guaranteed that a Miners' Officer will not have his job much longer or will not have the respect from either party to carry out his job effectively in the interests of safety. He is also placing at risk the Health & Safety of all mineworkers by the way of inferior decisions and outcomes.

During inspections, only the facts and information provided should be used during investigations and the decision making process. All problems and situations must be reviewed individually and the Miners' Officer must collect all information and facts available on the subject and problems at hand. He must not make decisions without having as much knowledge as possible on the problem at hand. If it involves some field we are not familiar with all available sources should be used. For example, if it is an electrical safety problem with machinery, use the knowledge of your electricians or electrical engineer, and likewise if it is a mining problem, use mining engineers, undermanagers or the men themselves. If satisfactory information is not available on any technical issues or more comprehensive research information is required then SIMTARS are always more than willing to assist a Miners' Officer with his problems.

Most importantly safety is the priority in any decision made, whether it is palatable to either the company, the men or both. If there is a border line case on which way to go with a decision always lean to the safest scenario. The hardest people to work for and be impartial are your own peers but if these basic principles can be adhered to, credibility is assured and respect will be fostered.

## **SOLVING PROBLEMS INFORMALLY**

I have discussed the formal use of the Miners' Officer and the way I believe our job should be done and carried out, but the most effective way I believe is the informal use of the Miners' Officer. This way the Miners' Officer is used without official meetings and agendas but is doing things on an informal basis because there is co-operation and trust from both parties which I said has been earned and I believe this a companies best tool for swift and smooth safety implementations.

The Miners' Officer and management should be able to discuss and talk openly to each other without being involved with a committee on any issues and also be able to float ideas so they can be taken to the men to get their feelings and ideas. This process is also available to management. We are fortunate at our Mine in that we share what I believe is a good working relationship of mutual trust between parties. We may have the most technically advanced equipment, machines and computers but our best asset is people with working experience for solving basic safety problems at the coal face.

Many industrial disputes have arisen over safety issues, if both parties work closely together most trouble can be avoided before it starts. Education and information go a long way with the workers. Just try and keep a secret or tell part of the story and get found out, or try the implementation of safety systems and procedures or equipment that are not fully acceptable without consolation and immediate distrust will start within the ranks and moral will drop and of course we know what happens next, all the graphs in the office take a dive. ie. Safety statistics, coal production etc.

The Department of Mines & Energy Inspectorate is not only the Industry watchdog but may be used by companies and any member of the Industry. A Miners' Officer should feel comfortable with contacting his district Inspector over concerns he may have on safety issues or if only to acquire information or an opinion on a subject. By fulfilling his role as a Miners' Officer properly and going about his duties in the correct manner, respect is also gained from the Inspectorate and because of this they can be very willing to help without formal inspections or meetings.

## **TRAINING**

As can be seen by accepting and using the knowledge of the workforce through their Miners' Officer many advantages can be reaped by the company. The education and ongoing training of

the Miners' Officers should be encouraged to keep them abreast of the changing systems, equipment, technology and research that is continually forthcoming which will help them to make the right decisions when called upon to mediate in a safety dispute.

The C.F.M.E.U. conduct annually a conference for all the representative Miners Officers in our State. There are many people here today in this room from many different organisations who have contributed to these conferences by the way of sparing their valuable time and giving presentations on a large variety of subjects involving our industry's safety. These are always accepted with great enthusiasm because of the amount of knowledge gained by the Miners' Officers. The presenters also are able to impart their knowledge to the grassroots workers and receive feedback which can gauge how relevant or effective their equipment or systems are working.

## **CONCLUSION**

Safety in our industry has dramatically improved compared to our early days when injuries were an accepted and integral part of being a mineworker. We have since implemented the best of safety systems, improved our equipment and machinery, standardised operation procedures and brought in extensive training programmes for both operators and supervisory staff. Most mines now have visions of nil accident or incident rates, but these goals will always be a fantasy without both parties confiding in each other and their representatives. There must be full trust, cooperation and mutual goals which have come by the conciliation process involving the grassroots workers of this industry. Without this we will never be able to achieve our ultimate goals.

Labour and management should be working to shed their traditional hostility and assume a new posture of mutual trust and shared enterprise regarding safety issues, this is the way of the future for our industry to improve in both safety and production.

I believe Southern Colliery is a good example of this process being initiated. Its not that we don't have disagreements - we do - but we do also know how to settle them with very little disruption to production and with NO compromise on safety.

Our safe future is in all our hands as a mutual partnership - let's keep it that way.

## **REFERENCES:**

Coal Mining Act 1925 - 1981  
Stevensons book of quotations