

Workforce Involvement from a Mines Perspective

I was grateful to Steve Wing (HSE's Chief Inspector of Mines), Steve Walker (Head of HSE's Offshore Safety Division) and Fraser Easton (Chair of the Workforce Involvement Group (WIG)), for arranging my attendance at the recent WIG event held at the Forest Pines Hotel near Hull.

We were also fortunate to be able to offers for places to representatives of the NUM and UDM mining trade unions. I think it was obvious from the moment we arrived, this was going to be no ordinary conference and I can also safely say that we found kindred spirits in the off-shore oil and gas community. I found the event uplifting and left with energy and commitment to continue promoting and developing the role and expertise of the safety inspectors operating in the mining sector. I know the training of our mining safety inspectors is an area Steve Wing is particularly interested in and I found the WIG format extremely relevant to this aspect of our discussions. Whilst it might be wrong to single out any speaker, I'm sure none would grudge the plaudits deserved following the presentation made by Willie Watt - Petrofac / Kittiwake.

Within the mining industry, effective workforce involvement is seen as a vital component of maintaining a safe work place. There is ample evidence that the safest mines are also the most productive because open communication becomes addictive, encouraging and enhancing better relations between workers and managers. The role of the mine worker as a fundamental part of the health and safety at work liaison process has been enshrined in law for many years under Section 123 of the Mines and Quarries Act 1954.

This Act set out arrangements enabling an association or body representing the majority of persons employed at the mine, to appoint a panel of experienced workers, each panel member having not less than 5 years practical experience of mining, to carry out inspections on behalf of persons employed at that mine. Arrangements must be made by the mine owner to permit all parts of the mine to be inspected at least once in every month and it is the duty of the mine manager and all persons employed at the mine to afford Section 123 inspectors with such facilities and assistance necessary to accomplish the inspections set down under the Act. They are also entitled to carry out inspections to accident or incident sites and can inspect any relevant document and can also be accompanied by special advisors. They are not entitled to exclude from any such inspection, the mine owner or a person appointed by the owner; the mine manager or person appointed by the manager. Whilst this aspect of the arrangements might sound a little intimidating, it actually serves the industry and the Section 123 inspection process very well. Full and accurate reports must be made of inspections made under the Act.

A special report form is used which is signed by the members of the inspection team and then sent to the mine manager. The manager then has 7 days to detail any action taken to address or remedy those health and safety matters raised in the report. Then, having signed and dated that report, the manager must, forthwith, send that report to HM Inspector of Mines and also a copy of the report must be posted in a conspicuous place at the mine for a period of 24 hours.

As an aside, as well as holding the mining portfolio for workforce involvement, I have a long-standing role advising the Chief Inspector of Mines on mines rescue and emergency planning and tomorrow, as a direct result of the contacts made at the recent WIG event, I am returning to Hull at the invitation of Les Larchet, Centrica, to observe OIM emergency training and validation. This is another example where we can learn from each other because when things go wrong, the situation can very quickly escalate at a mine or on an off-shore oil / gas platform. That is why it is essential that all workers, and especially those in potentially high hazard installations, play an active role in securing safe working conditions.

Tony Forster
HM Mines Inspector