Mines Safety and Inspection Laws in Western Australia

Kevin G Brown
School of Business Law
Curtin University of Technology

Abstract

The legislation dealing with mines safety laws in Western Australia changed quite dramatically in the 1990’s. This article provides an overview of the Mines Safety and Inspection Act 1994 (WA) and describe the main features of the current legislation and some of the legal cases that have arisen from it.

Introduction

Legislation dealing with safety in mines in Western Australia can be traced back to the Mines Regulation Act 1895. Before the current Act was introduced, the laws on mine safety were consolidated into the Mines Regulation Act 1946 and the Coal Mines Regulation Act 1946. These Acts were amended from time to time and remained in force until safety laws dealing with all mining was covered by the Mines Safety and Inspection Act 1994 (the Act). Despite being passed by parliament in 1994, the main provisions in the Act came into effect on 9 December 1995 after incorporating significant amendments made in 1995.

Much of the Mines Safety and Inspection Act 1994 (W.A.) is modelled on legislation in the U.K. and the Eastern States. The Act is based upon a style of legislation, often referred to as “Robens legislation”. Robens was the chairperson of a committee in the U.K. that first suggested a general duty style of legislation to cover workplace safety and health issues. The Act covers mines, quarries and exploration in the mining industry and contains some similar general duty obligations to those found in the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984 (W.A.). Thus litigation on that Act, and indeed litigation on any of the legislation based upon the Robens approach, is a useful guide to the understanding of this Act.

One of the aims of the Robens approach is to remove previous safety legislation that concentrated upon specific detailed legal obligations that are inflexible and could become outdated, with more durable, yet flexible general duties. Legislation such as the previous Mines Regulation Act 1946 was seen to be too prescriptive as many of the specific safety requirements were previously found in numerous detailed regulations rather in general obligations. The current Act imposes the ‘general duties’ suggested by Robens, but the regulations made under the Act also impose some more specific duties.

The objectives of the legislation are set out in section 3 of the Act (s.3). They provide for: securing safety and health of people in the industry; assisting employees and employers to reduce hazards; protecting employees against risks, by elimination of risks and imposing effective controls. These objects also promote fostering co-operation between employees and employers; involving people in the formulation of standards and optimum practices; and allow for people to contribute to the development of legislation and administration of the legislation.

Administration

Most legislation cannot be effective, unless some type of administrative infrastructure is in place to implement the objectives in the Act. The Act does this by creating a Mines

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1 A discussion of the definition of mining operations to include accommodation and recreational facilities on mining tenements is found in: C Stedman, “Editorial”, Minesafe, June 1997, Vol 8, No 12, p. 3.

2 Further discussion on the application of the Act to exploration is found in an article “Exploration comes in from the cold”, Minesafe, March 1996 Vol 7, No 1, p 4.
Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Board to advise the
Minister of Minerals and Energy on occupational safety and
health matters (s.90). The Board’s most significant activity has
been to produce a report on fatalities in the mining industry.¹
The Department of Minerals and Energy is given
responsibility for the administration of the Act. Inspectors
working for that department undertake the actual day to day
implementation of the Act, and the monitoring of safety and
health policy (ss 16-20).

The General Duties

The legislation places some important general duties are upon
certain categories of people, in relation to work associated
with mining. Specifically the duties are imposed upon
employers; employees; self-employer persons; principal
employers; managers of a mine; and certain designers,
manufacturers, importers and suppliers.

A characteristic of many of these general duties, is that they
reflect identical standards of behaviour that have long been
expected by employers and employees by the courts. The
courts have identified these general duties when implementing
common law obligations in negligence cases. The major
distinction between cases brought under this Act, from cases
based upon common law negligence, is that criminal penalties
arise out of the breach of the duties under this Act. In contrast,
at common law the emphasis has been upon the victim’s rights
to claim damages and attain appropriate compensation, if
some one has breach their legal duty of care.

Duties on Employers

The Act imposes a major duty to provide and maintain a
working environment in which employees are not exposed to
hazards. The obligation only goes ‘so far as is reasonably
practicable’ (s.9). The word ‘practicable’ is defined in the Act
to mean reasonably practicable. Regard is to made to such
factors as: the severity of potential injury or harm; the state of
knowledge of injury or harm; the state of knowledge of risk of
injury or harm; the state of knowledge about means of
removing or mitigating the risk or harm; and the availability,
suitability and cost of removing or mitigating the risk or harm
(s.4(1)). The issue of ‘reasonably practicable’ was given close
attention by the Supreme Court of Western Australia in a case
involving the prosecution of an employer, when structural
damage to an iron ore reclaimer caused the death of the
operator.⁴

There are some specific examples given in the legislation of
this obligation. They include a duty to provide: safe premises;
safe plant; a safe system of work; information; instruction;
training; supervision; consultation with safety and health
representatives; personal protective clothing; protective
equipment; that employees are not exposed to hazards in
relation to various dealings relating to plant and substances
(s.9(1)).

Section 9 tends to be the section which is most often used by
inspectors under the Act, because it is relatively direct and
employers are usually in the best financial position and
position of authority to make changes to improve safety and
health in the workplace. Prosecutions have been instigated
against a numbers of employers, for example in the iron ore
industry,⁵ the nickel mining industry⁶ and the gold mining
industry.⁷

There is also a duty on the employer to ensure that the safety
and health of a person not being his or her employee, is not
adversely affected as a result or the work that his or her
employees are engaged. The obligation only goes ‘so far as is
reasonably practicable’. This duty appears to apply to visitors
and to contractors (s.12(1)(b)). If the employer is an
individual person, then there is also a duty on that employer to
take care towards himself or herself (s.12(1)(a)).

There are also specific obligations placed upon employers in
relation to contractors and subcontractors, designed to impose
legal obligations that are similar to those placed upon
employees (s.9(3)).⁸ These legal duties cannot be simply

¹ See: “Report on the Inquiry into Fatalities in the Western
Australian Mining Industry”, Minesafe, March 1998 Vol 9,
No 1, p. 4.

⁴ Hamersley Iron Pty Ltd v Robertson SC(WA), Steytler J, No
980573, 2 October 1998, unreported.

⁵ Hamersley Iron Pty Ltd v Robertson SC(WA), Steytler J, No
980573, 2 October 1998, unreported. See also: “Hamersley

⁶ WMC Resources case; see: W. Pryer, “Mining firm faces

⁷ Meiklejohn v Central Norseman Gold Corp Ltd SC(WA),
Walsh, Anderson and Owen JJ, No 980236, 5 May 1998,
unreported and Forrestania Gold case; see: “Miner faces
deaths charges”, The West Australian, 13/11/98, p.34.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the legal duty towards
contractors see: K. G. Brown “Contracting Out by Western
abrogated by requiring contractors to sign deeds of indemnity.⁹

**Duties on Employees**

The Act also imposes a duty on an employee to take reasonable care to ensure his or her own safety and health at work (s.10(1)(a)). There is also a duty on an employee to take reasonable care to avoid adversely affecting the health or safety of any other person at work (s.10(1)(b)). It would seem that this last duty applies to visitors or people authorised to be at the workplace such as other employees or contractors.

The legislation provides some specific examples of these obligations. They include: failing to comply with instructions; failing to use protective clothing; failing to use protective equipment; misusing or damaging safety or health equipment; underground workers failing to report on the state of the works; failing to report any potentially serious occurrence (ss.10(2) and 11).

**Duties on Management and Managers of a Mine**

A general duty of duty of care is imposed on the principal employers and the managers of mines to ensure that a mine and the means of entry and exit do not expose persons to hazards (s.13). Principal employers are defined in the Act to mean the employer who is the proprietor, lessee or occupier of the mine and who has overall control and supervision of the mine. Managers of mines are people registered as such under s.33. Managers of a mine are also given other responsibilities under the Act, such as providing written duty statements for people (s. 44)¹¹ reporting certain events to the Inspectorate (ss. 78-79).¹²

**Duties on Designers, Manufacturers, Importers Suppliers and Constructors of Buildings or Structures**

There are general duties on designers, manufacturers, importers and suppliers in relation to plant and substances.¹³ One practical implementation of these duties is the requirement of supplies to provide Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs). A general duty is also imposed on persons who design or construct buildings or structures for use at a mine to ensure that the design and construction does not expose people to hazards (s.14).

**Duties on Directors and Managers**

Section 100 of the Act provides for situations where a director or manager of a company commits an offence. This occurs when it is proved that when a company commits an offence under the Act, the offence occurred with that person’s consent or connivance or was attributable to any neglect on the part of that person.¹⁴

**Criminal Penalties**

An important aspect of the general duties in sections 9-14, is that they create criminal consequences in the form of a penalty which can be up to $200,000 in the event that there is a death or serious harm to a person. The fine is up to $100,000 in other situations. If an employee is charged under s.10, the fines are up to $20,000 in the event that there is a death or

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¹⁴ Some discussion of the responsibility of mine owners and board members is found in an article by C. Stedman, “Proclamation of the Mines Safety and Inspection Act”, Minesafe, March 1996 Vol 7, No 1, p. 3.
serious harm to a person. The fine is up to $10,000 in other situation. Other offences in the Act impose other penalties.

**Resolution of Safety and Health Issues at the Workplace**

The legislation provides that ‘issues’ that relate to occupational safety and health, should be attempted to be resolved by ‘the relevant procedure’. This procedure is as agreed between the employers and employees, or in the event of no agreement, in accordance with a prescribed regulation. It is an offence not to follow this procedure. In the event of no resolution by this procedure, then there is an obligation on a safety and health representative (if there is one) to refer it to the safety and health committee (if there is one). It is an offence not to refer such an issue (s.70).

**Involvement by an Inspector**

Either the employer or the safety and health representative or the employee involved can notify an inspector where there is a risk of imminent and serious injury (or harm to health) of any person. The inspector can then take those steps that he thinks are appropriate (s.71).

**Refusal to Work**

The Act gives a legal right to an employee to refuse to work if there is a risk of imminent and serious injury or harm to the health of him or any other person (s.72). Note that the employer may give that employee reasonable alternative work (s.73) but that the employee is entitled to same pay and benefits that he would have been entitled to had he continued with his usual work (s.74). The Act provides in s.72(1a) an explanation of whether the employee has reasonable grounds for holding the belief that there is a risk of imminent and serious injury or harm. Section 72(2a) makes it an offence for the employee to leave the mine altogether without the employer’s permission.

**Penalty for Refusing to Work**

Section 74 A provides that it is an offence to pay or receive pay, when any person (other than a person who qualifies under s.72), refuses to work on the grounds that to do so would involve a risk of injury or harm to any person. The section is aimed at preventing employees being paid by employers when they go on strike over a safety and health issue. This is sometimes called an offence of making or receiving ‘strike pay’. The section does not appear to apply to payments made by unions to workers who go on strike.

**Safety and Health Representatives**

The Act encourages employees to identify safety and health issues to an employer and electing a representative to act on their behalf. Employees can request the employer at a mine to instigate the process for conducting elections for safety and health representatives (s.54-56). Amendments made in 1995 took away the administration of the elections for safety and health representatives, from unions. The functions of these safety and health representatives are to inspect the workplace, investigate accidents and to generally be involved in the interest of safety and health at the workplace (s.53).

**Safety and Health Committees**

An employer can decide to create these committees (s.65(3)) or an employee can request one (s.64(1)). These committees are a mechanism for employees and employer representatives to formally meet and consider safety and health issues that arise in that particular workplace (s.63).

**Inspectors**

The legislation allows for different categories of inspectors including district inspectors, special inspectors, employee’s inspectors and assistant inspectors. District and special inspectors are given wide powers of entry, search and questioning under that Act (s.21). The powers of employee’s inspectors are a little more limited. In 1996 the Mining Inspectorate announced that it was moving towards an auditing approach when carrying out its functions under the Act.  

**Directions in Writing**

Inspectors are given wide powers to give directions in writing under the Act. The directions may require steps to be taken in the event of hazards, including the power to direct work at a mine stop until a hazard is removed (s.22).

**Prosecutions**

The Act allows district or special inspectors to instigate and conduct prosecutions (s.21(1)(m) and s.96). As the legislation give rise to criminal sanctions, one successful appeal by a

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The defendant employer was based on the lack of clarity of the charges laid.16

**Codes of Practice**

The Act allows for Codes of Practice to be made. The purpose of these codes of practice is to identify practices that are considered appropriate and in some cases inappropriate. The legal significance of these codes of practice are that they may be used in evidence to assist in establishing what is ‘reasonably practicable’ for the purposes of assessing the general duty offences in the legislation (s.93).

**Regulations**

There are many detailed regulations made under the Act in the Mines Safety and Inspection Regulations 1995. They canvass many detailed issues and in many cases are quite prescriptive in nature.17 The penalties for their breach are not as high as in the Act. Most have a maximum of $5,000 for individuals and $25,000 for corporations.

**Overview**

The legislation purports to provide a balance between encouraging employers and employees at mines to identify and correct issues relating to safety and health, together with an opportunity for government to sanction those who breach their significant duty of care obligations. Improving safety and health practices in the mining industry will remain a difficult balance of prosecution policy between prosecution and assisting the participants to understand and implement their legal obligations. Many of the legal obligations in the Act are similar to those found in the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984* (WA). Thus many of the legal issues raised by the legislation can be found in discussions of that legislation.18

For readers seeking further information about the Act, the

16 *Meiklejohn v Central Norseman Gold Corp Ltd* SC(WA), Walsh, Anderson and Owen JJ, No 980236, 5 May 1998, unreported.
17 For example regulations 10.28 and 13.8 dealing with geotechnical considerations in underground and open pit mines (see, “Mining Geotechnical Consideration”, Minesafe, June 1996 Vol 7 No 2, p 13.