



Georgian miners face constant fight for basic rights and safety

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Abstract: Georgia’s underground mining industry is exhausting and perilous. Despite some recent improvements, there is still a long way to go regarding labour rights, safety rules, effective supervision and enforcement. Given the inherent hazards, government and private companies should identify and minimise risks as much as possible.

[Mikheil](#), a 54-year-old Georgian coal miner, who lost his 25-year-old nephew in a mine explosion, was soon called back to work. Despite 35 years of service, he was so afraid of becoming the next victim that he declared he would no longer work in a mine. However, he reluctantly returned and the very next day, his nightmare came true when he died in yet another accident. Several managers were held accountable.

Mining calamities are common in Georgia. In [2022](#), 330 people were injured and 35 died as a result of workplace accidents in mines; almost the same as in [2021](#) when 37 died and 253 were injured.

A troubled history

While [extraction](#) of mineral commodities in Georgia has diminished since the collapse of the Soviet Union, coal and manganese mining remain vital industries and sources of employment in

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Western Georgia (Chiatura and Tkibuli). Georgia has one of the world's richest manganese deposits and the largest manganese mining area in Chiatura, while significant underground coal mining sites are located in Tkibuli.

A total of 3,382 people were [employed](#) in manganese mining in 2023; 730 of them worked on a 14-day shift basis, which means seven consecutive 12-hour working days, of work with a 12-hour schedule and then rest for the next seven days. About 1,250 locals [work](#) in coal mining, according to data for 2022.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, dynamic mining activities were suspended until 2006 when extraction rights were [granted](#) to one company for coal and another for manganese. The majority of locals in both areas are employed in mines, therefore, the development of such industry has brought back vitality to the regions. Nevertheless, the work is aimed at economic profit rather than environmental protection or the rights and safety of workers. The harsh working conditions led the miners to [face difficulties](#) such as having to choose between being unemployed or continuing to work in hazardous conditions. Despite the difficulties, there was not a single case of strike or collective resistance before 2012; however, the first rally was followed by the massive annual protests. Mostly, the demands are similar as miners constantly face violations of their rights and safety by the management.

Current challenges and protests



Since then, it has become common for Georgian coal and mine workers to go on a strike, as well as to protest in more extreme ways such as starving themselves or sewing their mouths shut. Their demands [focus mainly on](#) their work schedule, plan and pay; paid leave, sick leave and insurance;

resumption of work and back pay. For instance, on 18 January 2023, miners were informed that their company would move to temporary work mode, which meant that mines and factories would be shut down and workers would receive 60 per cent of their wages. According to the company, this was caused by a market crisis and the decreased prices for its products. As the workers suffered financial injury and the shifts resumed only partial operations in May, they were forced to strike. Miners' other major complaints refer to not receiving paid leave nor getting full salary during temporary incapacity for work due to illness, despite these rights being stipulated by the [Labour Code](#) of Georgia.

Additionally, the miners are [requesting](#) supervised security and improved equipment. They emphasise the coal company's complete disregard for occupational safety norms and systemic safety failures by the company, particularly, the absence of appropriate equipment and protective clothing. Safety complaints are plentiful. Workers have to move heavy equipment by hand (120-130 kg items – for two people); mining pressure levels are not controlled in mines; dust concentrations are not measured after explosions; ventilation systems are damaged; and safe distances from explosions are not established by policy. Another challenge miners face is the [compulsory](#) multiple re-entry of previously worked tunnels, which creates a specific danger since tunnel stability decreases after a single operation. Proper reinforcement of the ceilings and walls of such tunnels is lacking. Despite these circumstances, the company has proposed imposing an even more demanding work plan, which miners consider as fundamentally unsafe.

Alongside their various demands for better working conditions, the miners are protesting [against](#) the ecological and environmental danger caused by the mines in Chiatura and surrounding locations. Local residents also regularly demonstrate against mining as their houses are damaged, and the environment harmed. Open-pit mining requires the excavation of massive areas and causes serious damage to the environment; this generates abundant huge pits and hills, which pose a physical danger to the local people. Besides, uncontrolled manganese mining contaminates soil, water and air. For instance, in 2017, the environmental harm caused by manganese extraction amounted to 416m GEL (USD\$159.7m).

Some recent progress: more needed

In 2006, in order to attract foreign investments and create jobs, Georgia [abolished](#) existing instruments for the protection of workers' rights, including the Labour Inspectorate. The new Labour Code [removed provisions](#) for weekly rest, limits on overtime hours, rate of overtime pay, and breaks during shifts. The new code introduced the possibility of oral, rather than written, contracts and made it possible to dismiss workers without notice and for any reason. As the implemented measures did not live up to expectations, Georgia has taken vital steps since 2013 to improve the protection of workers and state supervision. In 2015, the government established a Labour Conditions Inspection Department. The Labour Code has moved closer to international standards with the amendments made in 2020, by which the rights of employees were further improved.

To comply with the EU-Georgia [Association Agreement](#) and be in line with obligations taken under the European Social Charter and ILO conventions, several further steps were taken. Foremost, the Organic [Law](#) of Georgia on Labour Safety, enforced in 2019. This law establishes fines for

violations of labour safety which poses or may pose a threat to life or health. The amount of the fine is proportionate to a company's income, however, the highest fine is GEL 50,000 (approximately US\$18,264) even for businesses generating millions of US dollars in yearly profits. Another amendment took place in 2021 via significant changes in the Labour Code, which regulated specific matters in favour of employees. Besides the legislative mechanisms, enforcement and supervision of these standards became more efficient as the Labour Inspection Office mandate has been broadened since 2021.

The right to fair pay, reasonable hours and just and safe conditions of work, reasonable limitations on work hours and fair pay is [guaranteed](#) under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) obligates the state parties to [recognise](#) the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensures safe and healthy working conditions (Article 7-b). The European Social Charter also [provides](#) for a right to safe work, weekly rest, holidays with pay and fair remuneration, and requires countries to monitor these rights through a system of labour inspection. These international and regional standards are ratified by Georgia.

Georgia is also party to all core International Labour Organisation ILO [conventions](#), which further amplify protection for workers' rights, but has not yet ratified conventions that impose obligations concerning specific conditions of work, including those for mining.

Since protests are extreme and common, in most cases, third interference is essential and inevitable. Parties commonly [meet](#) with the Public Defender of Georgia, as well as using alternative dispute mechanisms, which are fruitful in the short term, at least. Progressive steps have been made with the amendments to the Labour Code, as well as the broadened mandate of the Labour Inspection Office, which was a huge challenge before 2021. The Labour Inspection Office is a significant mechanism for the protection of miners' health, safety and working rights. Nevertheless, to be harmonised with international and regional standards, Georgia should ratify further ILO Conventions, implement and ensure the full realisation of miners' safe and healthy working rights. Each workplace accident needs full investigation and strict liability. Companies operating in the mining industry must be accountable for the conditions at work. Furthermore, legislation should ensure that fines for violations of labour and safety standards are sufficient to provide an incentive for compliance, behavioural change and deterrent for future violations.