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Workers protest to save Italian coal mine

By Giulia Segreti in Rome

A protest by Sardinian workers against the possible closure of Italy's last coal mine intensified on Wednesday when their spokesman slashed himself with a knife during a press conference about 400 metres below ground.

"If someone has decided to kill the miners then let's do the cuts ourselves," Stefano Meletti shouted as he unexpectedly brought a knife down on his forearm before colleagues wrestled him to the ground in front of television cameras.

The protests at the Nuraxi Figus mine in southern Sardinia began on Sunday when 40 miners locked themselves underground with more than 600kg of mining explosives, joined later by 80 more workers.

Sardinia has been hit particularly hard by Italy's double-dip recession and the drama of the subterranean protest risks whipping up public discontent against the technocrat government led by Mario Monti.

The coal mine is owned by Carbosulcis, a company controlled by Sardinia's regional government since 1996. Producing low-quality sulphur-laden coal, it employs about 500 workers and relies heavily on annual purchases of 300,000 tonnes by Enel, a state-controlled utility, for its coal-fired power plant in Portovesme. In 1995 workers protested below ground for 100 days against possible closure.

The mine's future is in doubt beyond the end of this year. Workers are calling on the central government to hold an international tender for purchase of the mine and construction of a combined mining and carbon capture site, a proposal that dates back to 2005 and is estimated to require about €200m of annual investments over eight years. Unions claim that a new investment plan could create up to 2,000 jobs in the region.

"We ask politicians to give answers. Without the tender nothing can give us certainties, and without the combined project we are all ruined," Mr Meletti said on Tuesday.

Sardinia's regional government is backing the workers and has also proposed construction of a coal-fired power plant using carbon capture and storage technology.

Corrado Clini, environment minister, has expressed doubts over the viability of the plan.

Talks are to be held in the ministry of economic development in Rome on Friday, joined by Sardinian mayors who plan to march to the capital along with coal miners from the port of Civitavecchia.

Enel, which is developing carbon capture and storage technology with EU funding, said it was up to the regional government to issue a tender. But Enel also said it had no intention of being a “privileged interlocutor” and noted that a project of such “high technical complexity” would require significant public funding.

Enel said the coal from Nuraxi Figus was of such high sulphur levels that the utility had to mix it with coal imported from Colombia and the US.

Andrea Clavarino, chairman of Assocarboni, Italy’s coal industry lobby, urged the government to support development of the mine which he said with “clean coal” technologies had the potential to produce 1.5m tonnes a year and reduce Italy’s dependence on energy imports.