

Closure threatened in mining disaster town of Moura

Australian coal union imposes sweeping job cuts

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The Australian coal miners union has set another precedent for the wholesale destruction of jobs, wages and conditions in an agreement reached this month with mining giant BHP at the central Queensland town of Moura, the site of a notorious gas explosion in 1994.

Moura open cut miners voted on June 9 to accept a union plan to eliminate 131 jobs — more than one-third of the mine's workforce — cut wages by some \$200 a week and scrap many protective conditions in a bid to convince BHP not to close the operation. About 20 percent of those present voted in opposition.

The “memorandum of agreement” is part of a restructuring package worked out by the union and BHP to impose massive cost-cutting nationally. It includes greater “flexibility” in work arrangements, increased use of contractors, a “profit-based bonus scheme” calculated to cut take home pay, and steps to eliminate demarcation rules.

Even so, the management signalled that the cuts were not enough to save the mine because the workers failed to accept clauses in the memorandum that demanded “continuous productivity improvements”. Even if the company ratifies the pact, it has threatened to shut the mine immediately after, or even before, the 12-month agreement expires.

The sackings will produce another exodus from the remote town. The mine's closure could prove to be the town's death knell. Many local tradesmen and suppliers, engaged in servicing the mine, or providing for the town's 2,000 people, face bankruptcy.

Under conditions where BHP and other mining companies are chopping their workforces, the sacked miners will find it almost impossible to gain employment in the central Queensland region.

At least 500 jobs will be axed from the region's Goonyella, Peak Downs, and Saraji mines in coming months — bringing the total lost to 1,500 in six months. Families, some of whom have lived and worked in Moura for more than 30 years, will be forced to uproot and leave the district.

BHP's callous disregard for the fate of the miners and their families, and the entire Moura community, is nothing new. It epitomises the company's attitude in Moura and globally.

BHP's ruthlessness came to national attention in August 1994, when 11 mine workers lost their lives in an horrific gas blast in the Moura No 2 underground mine. Though only briefly reported in the media, the tragedy drew the attention of workers everywhere. It was the third underground gas explosion involving major loss of life in the region in 20 years, bringing the total killed to 36.

An inquiry set up by the then state Labor government recommended no charges against BHP even though it found the company to be responsible for the deaths. BHP had sent the miners underground knowing that a highly dangerous and unstable situation existed.

The name “Moura” entered the popular vocabulary of miners and many other workers to depict the sacrifice of safety and lives to profit — a process underway in every industry.

In 1994 the union sought to shield BHP from criticism, portraying it in the media as a “caring company”. The union's Queensland district secretary, Peter Neilson served on the government's inquiry and supported its recommendations.

Now the union is negotiating “survival agreements” nationally with BHP and other companies. On the New

South Wales South Coast a deal is already in place allowing BHP to axe 400 jobs from its five remaining mines and to drive up the rate of output.

With coal prices plummeting and demand collapsing, the union is effectively demanding that the workers sacrifice to ensure that the company gains a competitive edge in the increasingly ferocious struggle for markets.

The union claims this is the only way to ensure miners have a future. But the Moura experience demonstrates that, having extracted huge profits at the expense of miners' health and lives, BHP and the other mining giants will discard these communities without a second thought to seek cheaper labour and more profitable conditions elsewhere.



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