

Australia:

Union defends BHP after serious explosion at Newcastle steelworks

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30 April 1999

On the night of April 20 hundreds of people in the suburbs surrounding BHP's steel plant in the Australian industrial city of Newcastle poured into the streets after a tremendous explosion at the factory shook their homes. The residents stood aghast as flames leapt up and clouds of dense smoke rose from the plant's powerhouse and drifted across suburbs to the west.

Both the company and the Australian Workers Union, which covers steel workers at the plant, have used the fact that no one was killed to downplay the incident, but statements by workers reveal that the blast could have resulted in heavy loss of life and serious injury.

The explosion occurred at 9.25 pm, when three operators attempted to shut down a boiler that produces steam to power equipment in the Number 3 blast furnace. One of the operators was knocked off his feet and only escaped being badly injured because the main force of the blast blew out, away from him. Fumes affected the other two workers, resulting in violent dry retching, sickness and headaches. All three had to be taken to the nearby Mater Hospital for treatment.

The blast could be heard over 30 kilometres away. It ripped the bottom out of the boiler, blew the top one-third off the 20-metre powerhouse exhaust stack, and showered debris over a 100-metre radius. Falling lumps of steel and other material damaged the roof of the adjacent administration building. The windows in buildings 100 metres away were blown out. A Subaru car in a nearby parking space was flattened by a piece of flying metal, the size of the car itself.

The operators involved in the shutdown later spoke of their ordeal and of their concerns about safety at the plant. Glen Morris was in the control room when the explosion happened. He said a pipe carrying gas to the boiler was not sealing properly so that the gas levels had become far too high and a large quantity of gas had collected beneath the boiler.

"There was just this almighty bang and then the sirens went off. The whole steelworks is pretty run down and it's not surprising that things like this happen," Morris said.

Mark Roberts, who was also in the control room, said: "We have all the ingredients for a major disaster and we were just lucky that no one was killed." Both men said they did not know

what had happened at the time but realised that the gas had to be shut down quickly.

Craig Coburn, who was only two metres away from the centre of the blast, said he had only survived the ordeal because he had made a desperate dash to the building's control room after his hands and legs went numb, signs that he was being overcome by carbon monoxide fumes.

The potential for deaths was not restricted to the steelworks. As the powerhouse is located at the far eastern corner of the plant and borders on BHP's wharves as well as a busy suburban road, waterfront workers and vehicle drivers could also have suffered serious injury.

That lives were not lost can be attributed more to good luck than to any action by the company before or after the explosion. The 89-year-old plant is due to be closed down in September. Many workers point out that while BHP is attempting to extract every last ounce of production from the remaining workforce, it is anxious to ensure that costs, such as ongoing plant maintenance, are held down to a minimum.

Despite this, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) defended the company's safety record. The union's Newcastle secretary Kevin Maher told the media that the company "treated its safety and maintenance programs with the utmost gravity". He dismissed what he termed "anonymous" claims that the power station was an "accident waiting to happen".

However, Maher was forced to admit that in the months following the 1997 announcement that the plant would close, concerned union members had constantly rung up the union offices "to tell us that the company has been dropping off with maintenance on this or that in the plant".

Maher asserted that recently the situation at the plant must have improved because workers had "stopped ringing in with complaints". The drop in complaints has nothing to do with improved safety at the plant. Many workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* they had stopped ringing in because "the union does nothing" and they consider it "a waste of time and breath".

The AWU's claims that BHP has an overriding concern with safety are contradicted by the company's actions in the hours

and days following the explosion. Although management was forced to close down steel production because of the lack of steam, workers at the Rod and Bar division were not evacuated, and production continued.

Even after admitting that the exact cause of the explosion was unknown, and without waiting for the outcome of an official Work Cover inquiry, management stated its intention to restart the power station and begin steel production within four days of the explosion.

BHP executive Lance Hockridge ruled out waiting any longer to assess the situation because "this would involve embarking on further emergency plans, including the emptying of blast furnaces" that would delay steel production for an extended period. Hockridge said the damaged boiler would be isolated and an alternative one brought on line.

The record of deaths and serious injuries in the plant since 1995 also belies the union's claims.

- January 1999: Crane driver Ian Clarke, 44, died when he fell from a faulty ladder.
- March 1998: Mark Boyce, 37, and Andrew Swan, 24, received terrible injuries in an explosion in the company's BOS plant.
- February 1998: Terry Caslick, 30, a contract worker, lost part of his arm.
- January 1998: Ross Black, 58, was crushed to death under a falling roof.
- April 1995: Contract diver Stephen Lamb drowned while attempting to clear rubbish from underwater exhaust fans.
- March 1995: Crane drivers Kevin Fenning and Peter Naylor were incinerated when molten steel blew back and covered their crane cabin.

The union's response to the latest accident is consistent with its action since the company announced the plant's closure and the loss of 2,500 jobs. BHP's decision produced anger and opposition, not only among steelworkers, but thousands of other working people throughout the country.

Fearing that this could erupt in widespread industrial action, the AWU joined hands with Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) leaders Jennie George and Bill Kelty and the Australian Labour Party, to hose down the growing opposition.

After a series of poorly-organised protest stoppages, rallies and public meetings, designed to let off steam and demoralise workers, the unions joined BHP management to set up a "consultative committee" to implement the closure.

Department meetings followed, where union officials sought to convince workers that little could be done to defend jobs. The overriding concern of the consultative committee, and the union representatives on it, was to ensure unbroken production up to the very day of the closure.

The policing by the committee has led to a progressive downsizing of the workforce without opposition. But the cost of the union movement's concern for production could soon exceed the loss of jobs. The refusal to act on the growing

concerns of union members over deteriorating safety conditions may result in the lives of workers being sacrificed.

BHP Steel was fined \$200,000 by the New South Wales Industrial Court on Wednesday over the deaths of two crane drivers at its Newcastle plant on March 14, 1995. Kevin Fenning, 55, and Peter Naylor, 37, were incinerated when molten iron and slag blew back out of a blast furnace and covered their crane cabin.

The two drivers were using the crane to pour molten iron into the furnace when the "blow back" occurred. Handing down the penalty, Judge Barrie Hungerford said: "What occurred constituted a failure by the defendant (BHP) to a most significant degree of its responsibility to ensure the health, safety and welfare of its employees. The blow back was of massive, indeed unprecedented proportions. The result for the two employees was horrendous and quite tragic."

The company was fined a further \$10,000 for failing to report a similar blow back that occurred in March 1994. Although no deaths occurred, one worker was trapped in the crane cabin and only narrowly escaped serious injury.

Even though the \$200,000 fine is the largest safety penalty awarded against any company in the state's history, it is no more than a pittance to a multi-billion dollar corporation like BHP. It was BHP's ninth conviction under the state Occupational Health and Safety Act since 1990. The maximum corporate fine under the Act is \$500,000.

Another large Newcastle steel company, Comsteel, was fined \$125,000 on Wednesday for causing the death of one of its supervisors in 1996. Bruce William Boorman died from horrific burns he received after he was dumped by a front-end loader into a pile of molten slag. Judge Hungerford said the accident was "fully foreseeable and preventable".



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