

Miners denounce sacking with no entitlements

Steve Dean
16 June 1999

In what is becoming a more common practice in Australia, 150 miners at the Oakdale Colliery, 80 kilometres southwest of Sydney, were told last week, just after finishing night shift, that their mine would close.

Mine owner Max Dunbier told workers that the company, Advanced Coal, had debts of over \$34 million and this, coupled with low world coal prices, had made the pit unviable.

The real sting in the tail for workers was they were to receive no redundancy payments, as the Tax Office, investors and secured creditors had to be paid off first. Collectively, the miners are owed \$6.3 million, or an average of \$50,500 each. Despite the fact Dunbier claimed that there was no money to pay the sacked workers, his company has just reopened two mines in the area, at Brimstone and Metropolitan.

Miners were justifiably devastated by the news; in the weeks preceding the closure, they had broken all production records. Last year more than one million tonnes of coal were extracted from the 470-metre deep mine. Workers even took pay cuts, one in September 1997 and another in January this year, in an attempt to keep the mine open and to remain employed.

Ken Brown, a miner at the pit for over 34 years, said: "We have broken all records, we were getting 10,000 tonnes per man per year and all we got for efforts was a carton of beer each."

To add injury to insult, miners are currently working around the clock to retrieve mine machinery, before it is flooded, to sell off to raise some money to support themselves. However with a glut of mine machinery on the market, the sale is expected to raise just \$2,000 per miner.

The situation at Oakdale is similar to that of the miners at Cobar, in central New South Wales, who were sacked without their entitlements. For a year, the 250 workers fought a highly publicised battle to obtain

some compensation for their job losses. Many were forced to live on charity handouts because they were not eligible for social security.

After being substantially isolated by the trade union leadership nationally, the Cobar miners eventually received 80 percent of what was owed to them. Since then they have watched their mine being reopened by a new company with a workforce of only 120.

Job losses have cut deep into the coal industry in recent years. Near Oakdale, the mines at Coal Cliff, North Cliff, Nattai, Kemira and South Bulli have stopped operating. Faced with over-production and rock bottom commodity prices, coal companies are undertaking ever-wider restructuring and cost-cutting exercises in the drive to maintain profit levels.

Miners have also seen the erosion of their working conditions. Measures that have been policed by the trade union leadership include elimination of seniority, 12.5-hour shifts, compulsory overtime, and growing use of casual and contract labour.

Prime Minister John Howard has shed crocodile tears for the miners at Oakdale. In a patronising statement delivered on Sydney radio station 2UE, he said the company had a "moral obligation" to pay the miners, but his hands as prime minister were tied and he could not force the company to pay up.

Whilst offering sympathy to the workers, Howard said: "One problem is that if people lending money to a small business did not have first call [on the company's money] they would not lend and fewer people would be employed." The banks' profits are more important to Howard than the fate of workers and their families.

The attack on redundancy payments is part of a wider business drive to create a cheap, flexible workforce. It signals a sharpening of the assault on workers' rights, with long service, sick pay, leave entitlements, rostered days off, penalty rates and superannuation contributions all being targeted by the government and business

groups for review.

BHP chief executive Paul Anderson set the agenda recently, when addressing shareholders. He said the current closure of the Newcastle steelworks had cost the company \$700 million in entitlement payments, retraining and clean up costs. Anderson pledged that BHP would look long and hard before carrying out such initiatives in the future.

The trade union leaders have been notable for their deafening silence on the Oakdale closure. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) mining and energy president Tony Maher described the situation as scandalous and said his organisation would mount a nationwide campaign to protect the entitlements of all retrenched miners. He failed however to give any details.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact