

Sacked Australian miners given no help in Canberra

Steve Dean
30 June 1999

Coal miners sacked at Oakdale, near Sydney, over three weeks ago are still no closer to receiving any redundancy or entitlement money, despite staging a protest in the national capital, Canberra, on June 24. The 150 miners lost their jobs when the mine was closed due to low world coal prices and a \$34 million debt. They are owed \$6.3 million in accrued long service, holiday pay, sick leave, severance and redundancy payments.

The miners' trade union, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) staged a limited 400-strong rally outside the national parliament, attended by the Oakdale miners and their families, and joined by union delegates from various mining regions around the country.

Apart from CFMEU officials, the main speaker was Labor Party leader Kim Beazley. With much political drum-beating, Beazley told miners he supported introducing legislation to force all companies to pay workers' entitlements into a trust, to be paid out on retrenchment or retirement. "When we get to government that is going to be a first order of priority," Beazley declared. But he was a leading minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, which did nothing to secure workers' entitlements.

Michael Watson, a CFMEU representative, continued the rhetoric. "How many Oakdales do we need before someone does something?" he asked. Perhaps the rank and file should be asking this question of a union that has allowed the destruction of thousands of jobs over the past 15 years, as well as pay and conditions.

The mining division of the CFMEU has long ago given up challenging the right of the companies to lay workers off at will, let alone questioning the private ownership of the coal industry. Its only concern today

is to secure some payouts for sacked workers in order to prevent unrest.

In 1982 tens of thousands of coal miners and steelworkers stormed the old parliament house in Canberra to fight retrenchments. At that point, union leaders urged them to place their faith in a Labor government. Over the ensuing 17 years, both the coal and steel industries were decimated.

Today, the union leaders are still promoting the Labor Party, while appealing to the Howard Liberal-National Party government to introduce a levy of 10 cents on each tonne of coal produced, to go towards paying workers' entitlements. However, an hour-long meeting between officials and three senior ministers, including Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith, produced nothing except an agreement to meet again in three weeks' time.

In the meantime, Prime Minister Howard went on radio to reiterate his opposition to any such fund, on the grounds that it would increase the cost of labour and discourage investment. Later he and Reith foreshadowed amendments to corporate law to make it an offence for companies not to make adequate provision for meeting legal entitlements. Apart from the fact that similar laws already exist, such measures will not actually assist workers to recover their entitlements once they have been sacked.

Nevertheless, New South Wales Premier Bob Carr echoed the union officials in suggesting that "John Howard needs to show leadership on this issue and adopt a national approach to workers' entitlements".

This political point-scoring is of little solace to miners and their families, who are struggling to support themselves. One miner's wife, Robyn Thomas, told reporters: "We are having to totally restructure our life style. This happened to us before, in 1995, and I was

devastated. This time I am stronger and know Steve's job has gone for good. Steve is getting cranky but he is really trying to find work. He has a front-end loader ticket, a forklift ticket and can drive a truck but it costs \$800 for a permit.” Margaret Hill, whose husband had 23 years' service at the mine and is owed over \$73,000, added: “We are battling along but everything is so uncertain.”

John Tanner, aged 58 and just two years off retirement, is owed \$92,000 after 42 years at Oakdale. He said: “My partner and I had planned to travel, to buy a house and to do a few things together but now there is nothing to look forward to. What makes it worse is that we all signed what we thought was a two-year guaranteed employment agreement earlier this year which gave us a sense of security.” Tanner said he was not as bad off as younger men who had mortgages and children to feed. “The strain on them is dreadful.”

Meanwhile mine owner, Max Dunbier, a former state Liberal MP, continues to run his other two mines at Brimstone and Metropolitan; his five coal washeries at Wollondilly, Appin, Helensburgh, Glenleigh and Pelton; and his haulage company. His properties remain intact.

As union leaders try to negotiate with the Howard government, the sense of frustration among the workers will grow. There have been no calls by the CFMEU for a national stoppage or support from other industries, even though it is one of Australia's largest unions. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) leadership has been mute on the Oakdale issue.

Miners denounce sacking with no entitlements
[16 July 1999]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact