

Australian miners strike to defend entitlements

Terry Cook
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About 20,000 coal miners walked out on a 24-hour national strike from midnight last night, halting production at 150 mines. Talks between union officials and federal government ministers in Canberra yesterday had not produced any solution for the 125 miners sacked from the bankrupt Oakdale mine, south-west of Sydney, last month. The sacked workers are owed more than \$6.3 million in entitlements, including redundancy benefits and accrued leave payments.

Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith, accompanied by Finance Minister John Fahey and Industry Minister Nick Minchin, rejected two union proposals. The first involved paying out the Oakdale workers from the \$200 million held in the coal industry's Long Service Fund. The second proposal was for a 10-cent per tonne coal levy to create an industry wide "Emergency Fund" to protect the entitlements of miners sacked from failed companies in the future.

Emerging from the Canberra talks, Tony Maher, the president of the mining division of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) initially dismissed the notion of a national stoppage. Questioned by the media on possible strike action, he said he had "never made that threat". He added, however, that "the growing anger of our members is becoming very difficult to contain".

Within hours the CFMEU announced a strike. Maher admitted that the union had been "swamped" with demands from angry mine workers. He told journalists that the government had pushed the union into a corner. He confirmed that the union would still attend further talks with the government on August 30.

Since the sackings at Oakdale the union has bent over backwards to prevent industrial action. It sought to restrict opposition to a token protest outside parliament house by several hundred mining union delegates,

sacked miners and their families.

Major coal companies BHP, MIM, Shell and Theiss obtained an injunction in the Queensland Supreme Court last night, ordering the union not to incite industrial action. By then it was too late to cancel the strike.

One must consider why the government has rejected the union's proposals and risked the eruption of a strike that costs \$24 million a day in lost production? The 10-cent levy on production would amount to a paltry 0.2 percent of the average price paid for coal. Similarly, payment out of the Long Service Leave Fund would merely extend a current industry-wide levy by 13 weeks.

The mine owners and the government alike are hostile to any scheme that may set a precedent for the imposition of any future levies on the industry's \$10 billion a year earnings. Mine workers may well reason that coal profits should be levied to provide for other social needs—health, education, safety and pensions—although this is not the intention of the union bureaucracy.

In addition, payment out of the Long Service Leave Fund would cut across moves underway to scrap that fund altogether. Reith is preparing to adopt such a recommendation by Peter McLaughlin, a former head of the Business Council of Australia. The planned dismantling of the fund is in line with the government's "second wave" industrial relations legislation, which provides for the stripping away of conditions such as long service leave.

There is widespread sympathy and anger among working people over the plight of the Oakdale miners and other retrenched workers. Not only have they been deprived of their livelihood but have also been ruthlessly robbed of their legal entitlements. More than

3,000 workers from dozens of failed companies are owed \$30 million in lost entitlements. They go empty-handed while liquidators are paid out and the remaining assets go to “secured creditors” such as the banks.

The government, the employers and the unions are concerned that the growing hostility over this and other issues could begin to express itself politically and get out of the union leadership's control. After all, workers may draw the conclusion from the experience at Oakdale and elsewhere that under the present economic system, profits and the requirements of big business always take precedence over the needs of ordinary working people.



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