

Western Australian mine workers protest unsafe conditions

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The increasingly unsafe conditions confronting mining workers in Australia were highlighted last month when more than 200 workers employed at BHP Billiton's iron ore operations near Mount Newman in Western Australia took the unprecedented step of signing a protest petition and speaking out on national television.

Those interviewed on June 11 by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) program, "The 7.30 Report," said they were prepared to lose their jobs in order to draw public attention to the lack of proper safety standards and the prevailing atmosphere of management intimidation.

Two decades ago, the Pilbara mining region, which supplies about 17 percent of the world's iron ore, was a union stronghold. But today, the more than 2,000 workers at Newman's Mount Whaleback project, reportedly the world's biggest open cut iron ore mine, are predominantly non-union members, with about 80 percent of the workforce employed under statutory individual contracts known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs).

The petition declared: "The workforce here is generally stressed, unhappy, disillusioned, frustrated and disempowered to do anything about it". It said "morale is low" and workers who objected or reported unsafe work practices were treated by management as "obstructionists and resistant to change".

According to the petitioners, BHP Billiton, the largest global mining company, gives workers no choice but to sign AWAs. Allen Zadow, a maintenance leading hand, told "The 7.30 Report": "You don't have a choice. You either sign the agreement or you don't get a job, simple as that." Commenting on the dangerous conditions, Friede Morrison, who drives a 240-tonne ore truck, said: "I think they really want to get the ore

out. Production and safety really come second." Morrison added: "There's a procedure up there that you never dump (from a truck) at night without adequate lighting. And, you know, they'll dump in the dark because they're frightened to call up and say—'We need lights here, there's no lights here'. They're afraid to hold up production, and they'll just do it."

Morrison also raised concerns about the quality of training. "I was lucky enough to be trained by someone who knew all of the procedures, worked in the mine for many, many years and was able to pass on a lot of that information to me. Whereas now you've got a lot of green people training green people who've only been there a couple of months and all of a sudden they're trainers. And that's a real concern to me."

The petition was drafted and circulated by Gary Martin, a shift supervisor who was approached by his entire work crew over concerns with working conditions and management intimidation. Martin said: "I was considering just leaving. It's common enough that if you're not happy in a work environment, you'll leave. This is a little bit different in that if I did leave and I happened to see on the news that someone was seriously injured or killed here, then I'd feel pretty bad about that."

There is constant pressure to maximise production at any cost. Recently published statistics show that output from mining and energy projects in Western Australia is worth \$80 million a day. Soaring exports to China are largely responsible. On June 19, the *Australian Financial Review* reported that, in the year to April, Western Australia's exports to China were worth \$13.3 billion, up 41 percent from the previous year, 317 percent in the past five years and 966 percent over a decade.

Enormous wealth and profits are being generated and

amassed by the mining magnates and companies. For example, Gina Rinehart, who inherited iron ore reserves from her father Lang Hancock, more than doubled her fortune to \$4 billion last year, according to the *Business Review Weekly's* 2007 Rich List. Rinehart dramatically increased her fortune after signing a deal with mining giant Rio Tinto to develop the Hope Downs project at a cost of \$1.3 billion.

Likewise, Andrew Forrest of the Fortescue Metals Group moved into fifth place on Australia's rich list, increasing his wealth from \$810 million last year to \$3.89 billion, even though his company has yet to dig any ore from its \$3.7 billion Chichester range project. It is due to begin exports in mid-May 2008.

Fortescue's drive to meet that deadline contributed to two deaths at one of its railway camps in March this year. A category 4 cyclone demolished their shoddy temporary accommodation huts after the company refused to evacuate them, despite ample weather warnings. Many of the workers were inexperienced with cyclonic conditions. They had come from the eastern states of Australia, lured to the region by the prospect of earning higher wages in the mining industry.

Trade union leaders leapt on the BHP workers' petition to condemn AWAs, as part of their campaign against the Howard government's WorkChoices industrial relations laws, and for the election of a Labor government at elections due this year. Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary and federal Labor candidate Greg Combet said: "The trouble with the AWAs is that it leaves people one out on their own up against an international mining company."

Yet, the ACTU and its affiliated unions have been instrumental over the two decades in breaking mining workers' resistance to unsafe and oppressive practices such as 12-hour shifts, round-the-clock production and bans on industrial action. The offensive began in the 1980s under the prices and incomes Accord between the ACTU and the Hawke Labor government.

The unions' opposition to AWAs stems not from any principled standpoint to improve conditions for workers but from the fact that the unions have lost their bargaining role and revenue from union dues. The unions are constantly promoting collective union agreements as a better mechanism for companies to boost profits and international competitiveness.

In one recent example, on March 22 the Construction, Mining, Forestry and Mining Union (CFMEU) boasted in a media release on its website that "official (Australian Bureau of Statistics) figures from the mining industry (again) clearly show dramatically higher levels of productivity growth for mineworkers on collective agreements compared to those on AWAs".

When BHP began forcing individual contracts onto its workers in 1999, a bitter and protracted dispute ensued. Workers took industrial action at BHP plants across the Pilbara, but the purpose of the ACTU's campaign was confined to pressuring the company to retain the services of the unions in enforcing its speed-up requirements. After police violently attacked workers who were picketting the Mt Newman and Port Hedland mines, the ACTU called for "peaceful pickets" that would not impede anyone from entering the mines. The unions then shut down all industrial action and at a January 2000 meeting rejected a call from Pilbara workers for a national strike at all BHP operations.

Since then, the complicity of the unions has only deepened. They are demanding that workers cease any industrial action, in order to help get a Labor government elected, even though Labor has pledged to retain all existing AWAs, a policy that would protect the contracts in the mining industry until 2013 at least. Labor and the unions have no basic differences with the demands of companies such as BHP for ever-higher profits and greater "competitiveness" under conditions of globalised production.



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