

Australia: Coal terminal workers strike over enterprise agreement

Richard Phillips
3 February 2012

About 100 workers at the BHP Billiton-operated Port Kembla Coal Terminal, just outside Wollongong on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast, began a seven-day strike on Wednesday for a new three-year enterprise agreement (EBA). The strike is over demands for 4.5 percent annual pay rises, maintenance of existing conditions and job security provisions.

These demands are set against growing unemployment and attacks on working conditions throughout Australia and in the local region. The Port Kembla-Wollongong area has one of highest levels of youth joblessness—about 40 percent—in NSW. The coal terminal is next to the BlueScope Steel plant where last year the federal Labor government and the unions collaborated with the company to axe almost 1,000 jobs.

The terminal workers, who are members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), voted overwhelming last month for industrial action after management offered only a 4.3 percent annual pay rise. The company also rejected demands that additional middle-management terminal workers, such as engineers and office workers, be covered by the EBA.

The CFMEU's main concern is to keep the dispute within the framework of Labor's highly restrictive Fair Work Australia industrial laws as it engages in closed-door talks with management. The coal terminal has not been picketed and no joint meetings held with more than 200 CFMEU miners at the nearby West Cliff colliery, who also voted for strike action last week over their EBA.

The West Cliff walkout was planned for the same day as the terminal strike but called off by the CFMEU. Negotiations resumed after the union claimed that BHP-Billiton, which also owns the colliery, had made concessions. West Cliff miners are demanding a 4.5 percent annual pay rise and improvements in the existing bonus scheme. No details have been released by the union about the trade-offs to be made.

On Thursday, one day after the coal terminal strike began, a CFMEU spokesman told the media that negotiations with the coal terminal management would resume today. The union declared it was “committed to an outcome that would suit both sides.” This means a settlement that protects coal terminal profitability while ensuring the union retains its role as industrial enforcer of the company's productivity demands.

The Port Kembla facility is one of seven terminals around Australia serving the multi-billion dollar coal industry. Coal exports are vital for Australian capitalism, earning \$36 billion in 2009-10 and forecast to bring in \$53 billion in the current financial year. BHP-Billiton is the world's largest supplier of seaborne-traded coking coal.

Thus far, the corporate media has largely ignored the striking terminal workers. There have been no calls for government intervention to end the dispute or hints that the company might lock out the workers.

This could rapidly change, however, if another section of the BHP-Billiton workforce—3,500 miners from seven BHP Billiton-Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) collieries in central Queensland's Bowen Basin—decide to strike over stalled EBA negotiations. Bowen Basin

miners produce over 100 million tonnes of coal per year or more than 60 percent of Australia's coking coal exports.

BMA has offered annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker but with trade-offs, including longer hours, cuts to housing for single workers, unrestricted use of contract and part-time workers, and greater use of fly-in-fly-out employees.

Ongoing rolling strikes and bans at the mines occurred throughout 2011 for a new EBA until the CFMEU, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union shut down all industrial action in December.

The BMA's demands remain unchanged. Union delegates unanimously rejected its latest offer last month because of concerns over at least 15 issues related to contractors and union rights. Mass meetings of miners throughout the Bowen Basin were being held yesterday and today to vote on industrial action.

Like the coal terminal walkout, the ongoing union manoeuvres have been designed to isolate and straitjacket the Bowen Basin miners and create the conditions for the imposition of employers' demands. Contrary to their claims about defending wages and working conditions, the unions' central concern is that the mining companies continue recognising them as arbitrators of the drive for increased productivity and profits.

Coal industry workers can defeat the ongoing, industry-wide attacks on their jobs, wages and working conditions only by rejecting the backroom manoeuvres of their unions and acting independently. Striking terminal workers should form a rank-and-file committee and turn to the West Cliff and Bowen Basin miners and other sections of the working class.

The defence of jobs, conditions and living standards can go forward only as part of a unified struggle based on a socialist program against the giant mining corporations, Fair Work Australia industrial laws and the Gillard Labor government itself.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact