

Australia: Bowen Basin coal miners resume strike action

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More than 3,500 miners walked off the job today, beginning a seven-day strike at six BHP Billiton Mitsubishi (BMA) pits in Queensland's Bowen Basin. The dispute began 18 months ago and since last July has involved work bans, rolling strikes and other industrial action by members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

The strike follows a company secret ballot in which over 82 percent of miners rejected the latest enterprise bargaining agreement proposed by the giant mining consortium. It is the second ballot in the past seven months of Bowen Basin miners, who produce almost 20 percent of world's coking coal.

While BMA has agreed to annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus, its offer is tied to various cost-cutting trade-offs and health and safety demands that have been progressively ramped up by management during the past 18 months. The unions want equal pay for labour-hire employees, protections for permanent workers displaced by contractors, three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, increased superannuation and improved housing.

BHP-Billiton, which made a \$23 billion profit last year, has categorically rejected the union demands, claiming that they are "productivity-destroying". Two months ago, mine management declared that it wanted the right to modify mine rosters at any time. This demand tears up previous agreements requiring that any shift or roster changes be trialled first and introduced only if endorsed by a majority of employees.

The mining consortium also wants management, not the union, to appoint health and safety officers in the notoriously accident-prone industry. The company has

brushed aside miners' safety concerns, claiming that they have "absolutely no basis" and are "mired in the past".

Today's walkout follows the closure earlier this month of BMA's Norwich Park pit and the axing of 500 jobs, which was rubber-stamped by the mining union. The Norwich Park shutdown, which was announced just before the latest miners' ballot, was a clear attempt by the company to intimidate its entire workforce.

Striking miners are defying increasingly bellicose statements by BHP Billiton management. Last week, company chairman Jac Nasser claimed that operating costs in Australia were among the highest in the world and that the company's "operational decision making" was being threatened by the "constant threat of veto" by the unions.

If BHP was unable to meet investment criteria in any project, anywhere in the world, he continued, then the company "will direct our capital somewhere else, or we simply won't invest." In other words, unless miners' productivity is driven up then the Norwich Park pit closure could be just the first of more Bowen Basin mines to shut and the axing of hundreds more jobs.

BHP CEO Marius Kloppers, Rio Tinto Tom Albanese and the Australian Mines and Metal Association (AMMA) echoed Nasser's comments. Kloppers denounced the Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial court, falsely claiming that it made it "too easy" for workers to strike. Albanese claimed that the future of mining was being threatened by "aggressive" unions, while the AMMA called for new FWA laws to ban strikes that "offend public interest".

Contrary to these claims, the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the

unions have bent over backwards to implement corporate Australia's productivity and job-cutting demands in all sectors of the economy.

Labor's FWA legislation has virtually outlawed all industrial action, outside that taken during enterprise agreement disputes, and the unions have slavishly implemented company job cuts and productivity demands. The exponential growth of contract and part-time labour, fly-in fly-out workers and extended shifts in the mining industry has only been possible through the collaboration between the union bureaucracy and the mining corporations.

Last month, when BMA announced that it was axing its Norwich Park pit, the Labor government effectively endorsed the decision. Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten told the media that Labor was "not in the business of running coal mines" and that the mining consortium had the right to make "operational and commercial decisions".

With an estimated 30 percent of mining enterprise agreements soon to expire and declining Chinese demand for coking coal, BMA is determined to establish a new benchmark. Chinese growth rates have fallen to a three-year low, with massive steel stockpiles. The price of coking coal has plunged by more than 40 percent in the past year, from \$300 to about \$200 per tonne.

The consortium, which is being backed by other mining companies, has made clear that it will not compromise on any of its cost-cutting demands. BMA has already declared *force majeure* on its coal supply contracts. This not only gives the company commercial flexibility on its existing supply contracts but prepares the ground for a full-scale lock out of its Bowen Basin workforce.

In the face of these escalating attacks, the unions continue to isolate the dispute, constantly appealing to BMA to recognise that they can negotiate its productivity demands.

As far as the unions are concerned, the limited local strike action has nothing to do with defending miners' jobs and conditions but is aimed at breaking up the growing anger of miners over the long-running dispute and keeping them trapped within the framework of Labor's FWA industrial court.

Yesterday the union resumed negotiations in Fair Work Australia with the company over its insistence

that it has the right to change work rosters at any time. The talks will resume early next month, after the seven-day walkout.

Striking BMA miners cannot defend their jobs, living standards and working conditions if they remain within the political stranglehold of the unions. The first step in confronting the mining corporations' attacks is to recognise that a new strategy is needed, one that breaks through the isolation imposed by the unions.

BMA workers must make a direct appeal for unified political and industrial action involving miners throughout Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia and other sections of the working class now under attack—in the steel, aluminum, car and other industries. This requires the development of independent rank-and-file committees that reject the big business program of the Labor government and the entire union apparatus and fight to defend all jobs and hard-won conditions.

Such a struggle must be developed as part of a broad-based movement fighting for a workers' government based on a socialist program, which places the mining and other key industries under the democratic ownership and control of the working class.



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