

Anglo American sacks workers amid strike at Australian mine

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International mining company Anglo American last week stepped up its attempts to break a protracted strike by 140 workers at its German Creek coal mine near Middlemount in Queensland's Bowen Basin. The company announced the destruction of 90 permanent jobs.

The decision is aimed at intimidating the strikers and pushing the further casualisation of the workforce. The announcement coincided with advertisements by labour hire contractor One Key for a range of positions at "a Bowen Basin mine near Middlemount," to be filled "urgently" with "an immediate start."

The sackings are being facilitated by the Construction Forestry Energy Mining Union (CFMEU), which has done everything it can to isolate the striking workers in preparation for a betrayal ending the industrial action. Even as Anglo deepens its assault on the strikers, the union has not called any support action by workers at other mines in the Bowen Basin, let alone nationally, though they face similar attacks.

The strike, which began on August 22, is over the company's demands for a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that will slash wages and conditions. The lengthy delay in signing a new EBA means that Anglo American has effectively imposed a two-year wage freeze on many of the workers at the mine.

In the lead up to the sackings, the company issued a statement declaring: "Anglo American is legally entitled to continue to operate its mine during periods of protected industrial action and will do so utilising employees, contractors and supplementary labour who wish to work."

Anglo American has bolstered the number of security guards at the mine in a bid to intimidate strikers and continue production. A company spokesperson said the measures were to "ensure those employees and

contractors choosing to come to work can do so and not be impeded." Strikers have reported that the guards have photographed people on the picket line at nearby Camm Park and followed workers around town in cars.

At the beginning of this month, the CFMEU told the media the company was attempting to organise an alternative workforce to break the strike. The union claimed Anglo American had engaged labour hire company Workpac to advertise for excavator operators and to cold-call known coal mine workers.

According to the union, these workers were offered employment conditions better than those of existing employees, including \$60 an hour plus a \$2 an hour bonus if they stayed for three months.

Anglo American's provocative actions are part of a campaign to ensure that an EBA will slash rates of pay, prevent any increase in accident pay in line with coal industry standards and further casualise the workforce.

The company's ruthless drive to slash costs is part of a sweeping restructure of its global operations announced last December amid plunging commodities prices and slackening demand in Asia.

The restructure includes the sell-off of 60 percent of the company's mining assets, the axing of 85,000 jobs and the shuttering of mines. At least four coal mines operated by the company in Australia are targeted for closure.

Announcing the restructure plan, Anglo American CEO Mark Cutifani declared that its aim was "to deliver a total of \$3.7 billion of such efficiency improvements, made up of productivity, operating costs and indirect costs" by the end of 2017. This is on top of \$1.6 billion in "savings" already achieved last year.

Even though coal prices have improved substantially this year, increasing from \$US52 at the end of last year to \$US260 per tonne this week, Anglo American has

made clear it will continue its drive to cut costs and attack workers' conditions. A company spokesman declared that "further wage increases and additional costs" would be "irresponsible."

As at other mines, the CFMEU has played the central role in enabling the company's offensive.

Following the sackings announcement last week, the union issued another empty "condemnation" of the company and criticised it for refusing "a request to hold an information session." Behind the scenes, the union is undoubtedly seeking to cut a deal with the company to end the strike and ensure its own position at the bargaining table, while preventing broader industrial and political action.

The CFMEU, along with every other trade union, endorsed the Fair Work laws, which include anti-strike provisions banning secondary action and support strikes, when the federal Labor government introduced them in 2009. The unions always invoke the laws to isolate every dispute and suppress resistance from the working class.

At the same time, the company is confident that it has the full backing of the Queensland state Labor government of Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk and the federal Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull. Both have close relationships with the major coal companies.

In 2015, the newly elected Palaszczuk government gave an "iron clad" guarantee to the coal companies that it would not increase mining royalties. Earlier this year, the government awarded the mining industry a two-year 50 percent exploration expenditure discount, effectively providing a cash handout worth millions. The Labor government has signalled its support for Anglo American's actions by maintaining a complete silence on the ongoing strike.

The line-up against the Anglo American workers—extending from the company and the state and federal governments to the unions—underscores the need for new organisations and a new perspective. A fight can be taken forward only through the establishment of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, which would appeal to other mine workers and the working class as a whole for an industrial and political counteroffensive against the mining companies and the attacks being spearheaded by the corporate elite.

Such a struggle must be based on the fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including placing the mining industry under public ownership and workers' control.



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