

Australian unions isolate miners facing attacks on pay and conditions

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Mining conglomerate Glencore is continuing to demand significant cuts to workers' wages and conditions in new enterprise agreements (EBAs) at seven coal operations in the New South Wales Hunter Valley region, north of Sydney. Each mine is covered by a separate EBA.

The company has rejected union demands for "assurances" in agreements against further casualisation. It has also opposed any changes to redundancy arrangements, which currently calculate severance payouts on a 35-hour week, rather than the average weekly hours worked by miners.

Glencore is offering only 2 percent per annum pay increases, below the rate of inflation. Some of the previous EBAs expired as far back as July 2012, so some workers have had no wage rise for five years.

Glencore's intransience has been encouraged by the actions of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which covers the seven sites. The union is manoeuvring behind the scenes to broker a deal acceptable to the company. It has sought to isolate the disputes at each individual mine, calling sporadic "aggregate stoppages" and strikes by "individual lodges."

On Monday, during a second round of 48-hour strikes, around 1,300 workers from the Mangoola, Liddell, Bulga and Glendell pits, and the Ravensworth coal handling and preparation plant, attended a CFMEU meeting in the Hunter Valley town of Singleton.

The aim of the meetings was to let off steam, with union officials spouting demagoguery, while suppressing any discussion of a genuine industrial and political struggle against Glencore's agenda.

An official resolution was pushed through by CFMEU Northern District president Peter Jordan, without any discussion. It said the meeting empowered "the district to again co-ordinate aggregate meetings to bring lodges together to continue the fight." This means another round of token strikes.

No printed copies of the resolution were provided for workers to read and consider. Also, as was the case at the previous meeting, no roving microphones were provided to make it difficult for workers to raise discussion or questions. The anti-democratic character of the meeting was connected to the union's attempts to strike a deal with Glencore, and its fear over the mounting frustration among workers with the supposed CFMEU "campaign."

At one point, a worker shouted out to ask what the union would do if the company imposed a lockout at his workplace. Jordan dismissively declared: "Our attitude would be ... if you're gonna lock one job out, you may as well lock them all out." In other words, as in previous disputes, the union would do nothing to mobilise broader opposition to any company lockout.

At the same time, the CFMEU utilised the meeting to promote the empty rhetoric of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). To head off hostility among workers to the relentless assault on jobs, conditions and wages, the ACTU has recently criticised social inequality, poverty and corporate tax avoidance.

Union officials who have overseen countless sell-out deals with the major companies and successive governments, which have destroyed hundreds of thousands of jobs, have begun presenting themselves as champions of the working people.

The ACTU demagoguery seeks to subordinate a developing movement of the working class to the election of yet another pro-business federal Labor government.

The task of pushing this line at the meeting was assigned to CFMEU national secretary Michael O'Connor, introduced by Jordan as "Australia's greatest union leader." O'Connor, a decades-long union bureaucrat, has close ties to the highest levels of the Labor Party.

O'Connor claimed, without citing any evidence, that the unions were launching "campaigns everywhere"

against the major companies. Most of his remarks consisted of hectoring questions directed at the miners, such as “are you up for it?” and “I’m not too sure if you’re up to it.” His taunts were received with stunned silence.

O’Connor got to the nub of the issue when he declared that under the Fair Work Australia industrial legislation, “workers do not have the right to go on strike.” He asked: “What happened to the right of showing solidarity to other workers? Why is it, that in this country it’s illegal for construction workers and timber workers to take action to support you?”

What O’Connor did not mention is that the Fair Work laws were introduced by the previous Labor government, with the full support of the unions, as a means of using the union apparatus to police the requirements of the corporate elite.

After declaring, “We want to see change,” O’Connor called for the election of a Labor government, saying “let’s make sure we get a good result and get rid of this rotten (Liberal) government.”

A similar message was delivered when O’Connor and ACTU secretary Sally McManus attended a rally of Glencore Oakey North workers in the central Queensland town of Tieri on Tuesday. Glencore has locked out those workers since June 9, with the union trying to keep them isolated.

The attacks by Glencore at its Hunter Valley and Oakey North operations are part of a broader offensive by the transnational mining companies, which are slashing costs and ramping up productivity in order to bolster profits.

The CFMEU and ACTU willingly enforce the anti-strike provisions in Labor’s Fair Work laws. The unions fear that a unified fight by miners could become the focus for an industrial and political counter-offensive by the entire working class.



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