

Australia: Glencore steps up provocations against locked-out miners

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Swiss mining conglomerate Glencore is stepping up provocations against 190 locked-out workers at its Oaky North underground coal mine near the central Queensland town of Tieri. The company is seeking to force through an enterprise agreement that slashes pay and working conditions.

The miners have repeatedly voted down the company's retrograde "offers" that erode conditions relating to severance and retrenchment, dispute procedures and the right to workplace representation and would allow Glencore to alter rosters without consultation. The workers were locked out on June 9 after taking limited industrial action the previous month.

Last week, the company, with the aid of the corporate media and the Liberal-National and Labor parties, launched a witch-hunt against the locked-out workers.

Miners were targeted for protesting on the side of the road leading to the mine site, against the lockout and a scabbing operation involving the use of contract and management labour to continue production.

The Murdoch-owned *Courier Mail* published articles, based on "security reports" from Glencore, asserting "instances of disgraceful and abusive behaviour" by workers. The reports made unsubstantiated claims that company security staff witnessed one picketer threatening to use a crow bar on people entering the mine site and another threatening to rape their children.

The recordings from security cameras installed by the company to intimidate the picketers were also handed to the police. Videos published by the *Courier Mail* and other corporate outlets do not support the claims made by the company. They show workers shouting at contract and security staff driving past the protest. One protestor yelled, "you should be ashamed."

A police spokesman, quoted in the *Australian* on

October 12, said there were complaints of "alleged intimidating and or threatening behaviour," but none related to a protester threatening to rape children. "To date, the general demeanor and interactions of those involved has been largely of a suitable standard and within the constraints of relevant legislation," he said.

The *Courier Mail* also claimed two Glencore workers were facing charges. However, these charges relate to two alleged driving offences on the road leading to the mine in August and September.

Despite the police statement, the federal Liberal-National government's employment minister Michaelia Cash declared contract workers were being subjected to a "menacing campaign of bullying and harassment against themselves and their families."

Queensland state Labor Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk joined Cash, saying the *Courier Mail*'s reports "were concerning" and "any intimidation is not acceptable." Her government is supported by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which covers the locked-out workers, and also has a close relationship with the mining companies.

Glencore has been emboldened to deepen its attacks because the CFMEU has systematically isolated the locked-out workers.

The union has blocked any active support for the miners by the 19,000 workers that it covers across the coal industry. It has ensured that production has continued unhindered at Glencore's other coal mining operations in the central Queensland Bowen Basin.

Glencore is perpetrating the real violence in the Oaky North dispute. In its insatiable drive to extract even greater profits, the company is inflicting increasing levels of suffering and hardship on mine workers and their families.

In a video posted on the union's Facebook page, one Oaky North worker read a statement by his wife outlining the financial and emotional stress being inflicted on her family.

The woman stated: "Some weeks we can barely put food on the table as well as pay for our kids or my medical expenses as well as our everyday bills. I stay awake at night wondering if we will have a roof over our heads, or have the money to give our kids anything for Christmas."

The CFMEU, despite possessing multi-million dollar assets, appears to have done virtually nothing to financially assist the locked-out miners. The union is wearing down resistance while working behind the scenes to broker a sell-out deal that will satisfy the company.

This is in line with the CFMEU's role in facilitating a sweeping restructure across the company's operations.

Glencore's revenue from its Australian coal assets rose from \$US1.77 billion to \$3.1 billion in the last half-year. The increase was achieved through an aggressive campaign of cost-cutting. This included hundreds of sackings, the gutting of conditions and increased use of contract labour.

Glencore is continuing to demand significant cuts to workers' wages and conditions in new enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) at seven coal operations involving 1,400 workers in the New South Wales Hunter Valley region.

A number of the previous EBAs expired as far back as July 2012, so some workers have had no wage rise for five years. The union ensured continued company operations over that period, effectively enforcing a wage freeze.

Glencore's current offer at the seven sites is a 2 percent annual pay increase, well below the rate of inflation. As at Oaky North, the CFMEU is isolating the disputes at each individual mine. It has called sporadic "aggregate stoppages" and limited strike action by "individual lodges," aimed at letting off steam and preventing a unified industrial and political fight.

A miner at Glencore's Hunter Valley Liddell mine, where workers are carrying out two-hour rolling stoppages, gave an indication of the dire conditions that already have been imposed by the company and the union.

He told the WSWS the rate of casualisation at the mine "is nearly 50 percent" and the company is seeking to "weed out more permanents" because "casuals are paid up to 40 percent less for doing the same work."

Asked about the Oaky North lock-out, he commented: "In the old days there would have been national action but this is now illegal under the present Fair Work Australia (FWA) laws that stop such strikes but allow the companies to instantaneously lock-out workers."

The former federal Labor government introduced FWA in 2009, with the full support of the unions, including the CFMEU. The unions invariably invoke FWA's anti-strike provisions to suppress resistance on the part of workers. This is in line with their role as an industrial police force of the corporations.



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