Australian mining union isolates locked out Oaky North workers

Terry Cook
3 February 2018

Swiss mining conglomerate Glencore is continuing the lockout of around 190 workers at its Oaky North underground coal mine near the central Queensland town of Tieri. The workers were locked out on June 9 after they rejected a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that cut wages and working conditions, and took limited industrial action.

This week Glencore provocatively applied to the FWC to terminate the current EBA. This means that, if the lockout were lifted, Oaky North miners would be employed under an industry award, on inferior pay and conditions.

On January 24, workers voted down—by 164 to 11—an "in principle" EBA negotiated by the company and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) at the Fair Work Commission (FWC)—Australia's pro-business industrial tribunal. The CFMEU has released no details of this "in principle" deal.

It was the third time that the workers have rejected EBA "offers" that erode conditions relating to severance and retrenchment, dispute procedures, casual hire and workplace representation, and allow Glencore to alter rosters without consultation.

The six-month lockout is the longest in Australian history. While the CFMEU union demagogically denounces Glencore's "threatening behaviour," it has utilised the Fair Work legislation's anti-strike provisions, which outlaw all solidarity industrial action by other workers, to isolate the miners and create the conditions for acceptance of a deal that would satisfy the company's demands.

The CFMEU has not called any industrial action by the 19,000 workers it covers across the Australian coal industry to back the locked-out workers. It has allowed production to continue unhindered at Glencore's other coal mining operations in the central Queensland Bowen Basin.

In December, the union ended all industrial action by 1,400 of its members at Glencore's Hunter Valley coal mines in New South Wales, pushing through new retrograde EBAs.

At the same time, the CFMEU has enforced directives by FWC judges, ensuring that Oaky North production continues using contract labour and managerial staff.

The locked-out workers have been restricted to an ineffective protest next to the main road leading to the mine site. The protestors have even been forbidden by a FWC ruling from shouting denunciations of the scab workforce entering the site.

The CFMEU's actions are in line with its role in facilitating a sweeping cost-cutting restructure across Glencore's coal operations that included hundreds of sackings, the gutting of conditions and the increased use of contract labour. The restructure allowed the company to increase revenue from its Australian coal assets from $US1.77 billion to $3.1 billion in the first half of 2017.

The CFMEU has likewise worked with management across the entire sector. Last November, for example, it overrode substantial rank-and-file opposition to push through an EBA at Griffin Coal in Western Australia that slashed workers' hourly pay rates by 25 percent.

Last July, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus made a flying visit to Oaky Creek, pledging her "solidarity" with the locked-out workers. Her pledge was nothing but hot air.

McManus's "photo-op" trip to Oaky Creek, along with fleeting appearances at other industrial disputes, is part of the ACTU's campaign to divert the deep-going working-class anger over job destruction, falling living standards and the draconian Fair Work regime behind the election of yet another pro-market Labor government.

McManus claims that the Fair Work laws "are broken" and would be fixed by a Labor government. In fact, the Rudd Labor government introduced the laws in 2009 with the full support of all the trade unions. Far from being "broken," the legislation is functioning exactly as intended: to politically strangle the working class and prevent any opposition to the big business assault on working conditions and basic rights.

The most recent example is the January 25 FWC ruling that banned a planned 24-hour strike by New South Wales rail workers. The rail unions immediately complied with the FWC directive, which illegalised any form of industrial action whatsoever for six weeks. Under the Fair Work laws, the commission can outlaw any industrial action it deems a potential "threat" to the economy or public safety.

The Oaky North miners are taking a courageous stand against the corporate drive to dismantle all past gains. They cannot be left to fight the combined forces of the company, the CFMEU, the capitalist courts and political establishment alone.

Miners and other workers must organise action to break this isolation as an important step toward initiating a unified campaign across the entire working class against the employers' offensive. Such a struggle necessarily means breaking out of the grip of the unions and Labor, which act at all times to defend the capitalist profit system.

New organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees under the democratic control of workers, must be established. Above all, what is required is a socialist perspective, aimed at establishing a workers' government that would dismantle all laws restricting workers' rights and place all key industries, including the mining, oil and gas corporations, under public ownership and workers' control.