Australia: Governments, unions responsible for spate of deaths in Queensland mining industry

Robert Campion
12 December 2019

Another mining fatality in the state of Queensland last month has highlighted worsening safety conditions across the industry, resulting from the policies of the major corporations, Labor and Liberal-National governments and the corporatised trade unions.

On the night of November 25, 57-year-old Brad Duxbury was working at the longwall of Carborough Downs underground mine, north-east of Moranbah in central Queensland, when he was crushed by a coal fall.

The incident extends the tally of mining-related deaths this year in Queensland to five. The tragic fatality is the seventh in 18 months, the highest level in the state since 1997.

Duxbury was a long-term employee of Fitzroy Resources Australia, which produces coking coal for international markets in steel manufacturing.

The mine site was closed following the accident, and investigations by the company, coal mine authorities, police and union representatives are still underway to determine the cause of the collapse.

Rather than bringing about a swift improvement in mining safety, the investigation will likely be dragged-out for months in order to provide cover for those responsible. Previous parliamentary investigations have played a crucial part in suppressing workers' opposition to what is a systematic onslaught against safety and other basic conditions.

Two, sham "independent reviews" are still underway concerning the last state-fatality; the death of 27-year-old contractor Jack Gerdes, who was crushed between an excavator and a set of stairs at the Baralaba North coal mine in central Queensland in July.

An investigation launched by Queensland's Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy and Golding Contractors, the labour-hire company that employed Gerdes, is still ongoing. Before the investigation had even begun, the state Labor government's mining minister Anthony Lynham announced there was "no blame" for the incident.

In a recent interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Gerdes' parents condemned the entire process. Gerdes declared: "There should be a more immediate response to those things; it doesn't take a year to work out what's wrong."

Union officials and parliamentarians have proposed other means for carrying out whitewashes of those responsible for the deaths. The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), which covers the sector, has called for a Royal Commission into mine safety, while Liberal National Party opposition mining spokesman Dale Last has advocated for a cross-parliamentary Safety Inquiry.

The Labor Party government blocked the latter, with Lynham saying it would, "divert tripartite attention, commitment, time and resources from progressing immediate and important initiatives to improve mine worker safety."

One would search in vain for these "important initiatives." What limited action has been taken is to implicitly blame workers, by organising "safety reset" meetings which have involved 50,000 miners in the state being forced to complete "refresher safety courses." Meanwhile the companies and politicians responsible remain free to operate as before.

The last previous fatality in Australia occurred in the Northern Territory (NT) in August, when Craig Butler was crushed by 48,000 tonnes of soil at an open cut mine at Bootu Creek. Investigations are still underway

© World Socialist Web Site

for this incident, though recent evidence from an investigation by the ABC has emerged showing that there were over a dozen safety complaints and three wall collapses in the months prior to the accident.

After 17 complaints were made to NT Worksafe in the year leading up to Butler's death, not one inspector from the government body attended the site.

As for Queensland, the number of government safety inspections declined from 1,781 in the 2015–2016 financial year, to 1,241 in 2018–2019.

Lynham claimed in July that the reduction was due to "prioritisation of workload as a result of fatal accidents investigation and increased focus on coal workers' pneumoconiosis."

Pneumoconiosis, or black lung as it is commonly known, has been ballooning in Queensland over recent years. By the state government's own admission, instances of the incurable disease among coal workers have risen from 3 in 2015 to 39 as of October this year—though evidence of a decades long cover-up means the true figures could be much higher.

The destruction of full-time jobs and the rise of contract labour has played a chief role in deteriorating safety standards. About half of Queensland's mining workers are now contractors from labour hire companies, giving mining companies the flexibility to fire and hire in line with the demands of the market, placing many workers in precarious employment.

Workers are subjected to bonuses and fines in regard to safety performance, putting many under pressure to use faulty equipment and under-report incidents and "lost time injuries" (LTI), which result in lost production time.

The *Courier Mail* reported in October that there had been more than 11,500 "high potential incidents" at Queensland mines and quarries since 2013–14, including fires, along with equipment and structural failures.

In the wake of Duxbury's death, the state Labor government has announced an extension of two-year old industrial manslaughter laws to include the mining industry. The laws were enacted on the pretence of protecting industrial workers by holding individual employers to account for workplace deaths if they are found to be negligent in workplace safety.

The laws will do nothing of the sort, as the conditions facing miners are a product not just of the actions of the CEOs but of the entire gamut of politicians and unions who uphold the profit system. There has not been one prosecution under the legislation, despite the fact that it has been in place across other industries for two years.

CFMMEU mining and energy president Stephen Smyth welcomed the industrial manslaughter laws, saying they were a "good start" and "well overdue." On the safety risks resulting from an increase in contractors, Smyth added: "It's certainly something that has led to a lot of inexperienced people coming in, not being trained or not mentored right, and has led to a culture of behaviour where the employer just thinks they can do whatever they like and get away with it."

These conditions, however, are a direct result of the actions of the trade unions. For decades, they have collaborated with company management, enforcing cuts to full-time work and conditions in the name of ensuring "international competitiveness," while suppressing any opposition from workers.

In July 2017, the CFMMEU isolated a struggle by workers at Glencore's Oakey North Coal mine who were locked out for 230 days for opposing increased casualisation.

The CFMMEU enforced the anti-strike provisions of the 2009 Fair Work Act, introduced by the former federal Labor government with the full support of the unions. The union eventually pushed a sell-out deal containing the company's key demands for the suppression of wages and ongoing attacks on conditions.

The conditions in the mining sector in Queensland, and across the country, are a graphic demonstration of the fact that workers can only take up a fight for their social rights, including to workplace safety, through a rebellion against the trade unions and a complete break with the big business Labor Party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site