

Australian mine explosion leaves five workers with horrific injuries

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Five coal mine workers suffered severe injuries in a gas explosion on Wednesday at Anglo American's underground Grosvenor Mine in central Queensland's Bowen Basin. Four of the injured workers are in critical conditions and fighting for life while another is reportedly in a very serious condition. All sustained horrific burns to their upper torsos and airways.

Unable to receive adequate treatment in the Isaac local government region, which has limited hospital facilities, the victims were flown to Brisbane in a complex medical evacuation involving five separate planes, with retrieval doctors and nurses working on patients. Four of the injured workers were intubated and ventilated.

While emergency services were called to the mine site at 3 p.m., the aeromedical services needed to transport the injured did not arrive at the local Moranbah hospital to organise the flights to Brisbane until about 6 p.m.

Moreover, there was potential for a catastrophic loss of life to have occurred because hundreds of workers were underground at the time of the blast. Such an outcome would have overwhelmed the region's medical facilities, as well as the aeromedical services.

Isaac authorities had already raised grave concerns about the inability of the region's medical resources to cope with a COVID-19 outbreak after the mining industry was exempted from lockdowns. The Queensland state Labor government did not act on these concerns.

Workers at the mine had raised concerns about dangerous gas levels in the days before the explosion. Anglo American had been forced to stop work at the mine repeatedly, but only for up to two hours at a time, after high methane levels triggered underground sensors.

Anglo American said the workers were hired through labour hire company One Key Resources. The mine reportedly had about 400 labour hire employees on site. The region has 26 active coalmines employing 10,000 out-of-region workers, along with local mineworkers.

There is a rising toll of deaths and injuries in Queensland mines and quarries, including eight fatalities in the 18 months to last December. In desperate damage control, designed to cover up her government's responsibility for these disasters, state Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk told the media she took any failings to protect regional workers' "extremely seriously."

However, like other governments with large mining projects, the Labor government has worked systematically to prevent anything cutting across the drive of the giant mining companies for ever-greater levels of profit, which also boost mining royalties that flow into state coffers.

Moreover, the government has presided over a fall in the number of government safety inspections in the state's mining sector from 1,781 in the 2015–2016 financial year, to 1,241 in 2018–2019.

In a further move to placate regional anger, Palaszczuk dispatched Mine Safety Minister Anthony Lynham "to Moranbah to meet with the mayor and to talk to the community." Lynham mooted appointing a board of inquiry.

This would be the first such investigation into a mine disaster since the mining warden's inquiry into the 1994 mine explosion at nearby Moura, which killed 11 workers.

That inquiry—which included a leading mining union representative on its board—found that BHP had sent the miners underground knowing that a highly volatile and dangerous situation existed. Yet the inquiry

recommended that no charges be laid. This was a green light to the mining companies to continue to kill and maim, with impunity.

Significantly the tragedy at Grosvenor Mines comes just months after the report of an investigation commissioned by the state's Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy into 47 deaths in the state's mines and quarries from 2000 to 2019. It found most of the deaths were preventable and warned that more lives were at risk without a safety overhaul.

Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) district president Stephen Smyth told the media the union supported calling a board of inquiry. As seen by the previous record, any such inquiry would cover-up the underlying profit-driven causes and permit the carnage to continue.

The union is just as culpable for this rising death and injury toll as the companies and the government. Smyth admitted that the union was aware of the workers' concerns about gas levels at Grosvenor, yet it failed take any action to prevent workers going into the mine under very dangerous conditions.

The union's conduct cannot be put down to an error of judgment. For decades, in the name of making Australian-based mining companies "internationally competitive," the unions have overseen the destruction of protective work practices and helped employers rip back working conditions.

The unions have consistently suppressed opposition by mine workers, and enforced the anti-strike laws of the 2009 Fair Work Act, introduced by the last federal Labor government with the full support of the unions.

One of the outcomes of the union-employer collaboration has been the erosion of a more experienced full-time mining workforce and its replacement with less adequately trained casual and contract workers, undermining workplace safety. Half of Queensland's mining workers are employed by labour hire companies, allowing companies to fire and hire in line with the demands of the market, while producing precarious employment arrangements.

The record demonstrates that the unions operate as an arm of company management, and along with the Labor Party, are responsible for the conditions that have led to the tragic deaths and injuries across the mining industry.

Mineworkers need to break with these corporatised,

pro-business entities and build new independent working class organisations that will fight for the highest safety standards and an end to casualisation, and link up with the similar struggles of miners worldwide against the global conglomerates.

This fight requires a socialist perspective to place the global mining industry sector under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class so that production can be organised on the basis of safe and rational planning, and the massive proceeds can be used to provide for social need, not corporate profit and private wealth.



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