

Australian unions enforce continued mining production throughout pandemic

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian mining sector has been exempted from any lockdown measures, risking the health and lives of workers to ensure that multi-billion dollar profits continued to flow to the major companies.

As early as March 25 this year, before measures to contain the virus had been implemented, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison met with the representatives of the major mining firms, including BHP and Rio Tinto, to ensure that the industry was declared “essential,” thereby avoiding any restrictions.

The mining unions have played the central role in enforcing continued production.

On April 1, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the mining and energy division of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining & Energy Union (CFMMEU) published a joint statement with mining employers’ group, the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA).

The statement insisted that “mining needs to keep operating because Australia needs the income and economic activity generated by our sector to fund initiatives for the benefit of all Australians.”

In reality, the mining companies have for years slashed working conditions to cut costs and increase profits and shareholder values.

Safety across the sector has been continually undermined as part of a bid to ramp-up production levels resulting in fatalities and serious injuries in what is rated one of the country’s most dangerous industries.

Last year, 24 miners were killed at work. Many of the incidents were described by safety agencies and experts as “avoidable.” The fatalities have continued into 2020 with four deaths to date. Four mine workers are fighting for their lives and a fifth is in a serious

condition after a gas explosion last week at Anglo American’s Grosvenor Mine in Queensland’s Isaac Region.

Among the changes imposed by the mining companies that have had a direct impact on safety is the ever greater casualisation of the sector. This has resulted in the dismantling of experienced permanent workforces and their replacement by under-trained workers more vulnerable to accident and injury.

As for the so-called funding initiatives “for the benefit of all Australians” claimed in the MCA-union statement, the mining companies have reacted violently to any suggestion that taxes on their massive profits be increased. Mining giants have also used a number of mechanisms, such as complicated swap-financing schemes, to either massively reduce their tax bill or avoid paying tax altogether.

At the same time, the royalties paid by the mining giants to state governments, held up by the employers as testimony to their community spirit, are miniscule compared to the multi-billion dollar profits exacted from the exploitation of the resources that are handed over to them. Once these deposits are exhausted or their extraction is deemed no longer profitable, the sites are abandoned leaving environmental damage and devastated communities.

This same callous indifference is revealed in the exposure of mining communities to potential infections because mining companies have been given exemptions from travel restrictions imposed by most states.

Intrastate travel for mine workers to reach remote sites has been permitted. Mining companies have been able to organise special charter flights for their hundreds-strong fly-in fly-out workforces while other out of region workers have been allowed to travel by road.

Local authorities in Central Queensland towns that are hosts to major coal mining operations, for example, became increasingly alarmed over the large numbers of remote workers that continued to cycle through camps and mine sites after a worker at the BHP-Mitsubishi Alliance Blackwater coal mine, about 200 kilometres west of Rockhampton, tested positive for Covid-19 in late March.

In April, the local council in the Queensland region of Isaac, the site of 26 active coal mines employing 10,000 out-of-region workers, called on the state government to halt the movement of transient workers warning that the regional healthcare system was not equipped to deal with even a limited outbreak of the coronavirus.

Isaac Regional Council Deputy Mayor Kelly Vea Vea told the media that while the state government had generally directed “everybody to stay in your suburb, stay close to home and only move for essential needs ... it’s really been business as usual in terms of the mining industry.”

The unions have joined employers in playing down the potential dangers by claiming in the joint statement that “strict measures to minimise the risk of workers being exposed to COVID-19” are in place. These assertions have been contradicted by the statements of mine workers themselves.

One local GP in the mining town of Moranbah told reporters she had spoken to mine workers “anxious that workplaces were not following social distancing recommendations.” One had revealed that workers were put on crowded buses or packed into cars to reach the mine site. “It’s all fine them (the company) saying on paper, yes, we’re doing this, we’re putting on more buses; it doesn’t matter if that’s not following through to the mine,’ he said.

The exemptions also apply to Ports Australia. They have been permitted to continue the free movement of export commodities and the import of key consumables for the mining sector. Rail and trucking industries that deliver commodities to ports and consumables to mine sites have also continued operations.

At the same time, the mining companies, with the assistance of the unions, are utilising the COVID-19 crisis to restructure their operations and undermine working conditions. Many are seeking to impose onerous shift arrangements long rejected by mine

workers that will see them spend even more time away from their homes and families.

Major employers in the gold mining sector are introducing shift changes designed to increase production so they can cash in on the near record gold price that stands at \$A1,600 an ounce.

In late March, under the guise of limiting exposure during the pandemic, the country’s second-largest gold miner Northern Star Resources introduced a new work schedule of two weeks on and two weeks off even as the company admitted the changes would increase the danger of fatigue, a development that would clearly impact on safety, and produce mental health issues for workers.

Following suit, gold miner Saracen Mineral Holdings, which has a 50 percent stake in the Fimiston Open Pit in Kalgoorlie alongside Northern Star Resources, implemented even longer rosters of three weeks on, three weeks off.

Similar changes have been introduced by giant mining companies across the multi-billion dollar iron sector. Fortescue, the world’s fourth biggest iron ore miner, has changed rosters from two-weeks-on, one-week-off to four-weeks-on, two-weeks-off.

While the mining companies claim that the roster arrangements are a temporary response to the pandemic, these and other changes long demanded by the mining companies will likely become a permanent feature across the sector.



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