

Australian inquest says “grossly deficient” safety caused death of Anglo American mine worker

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Just weeks after a gas explosion at Anglo American’s Grosvenor Mine in Central Queensland seriously injured five workers, the company’s disregard for work safety has again been exposed.

Last month, six years after Paul McGuire, a 34-year-old electrician and father of two, was killed at Anglo American’s Grasree mine in Queensland, the coronial inquest into the tragedy was finally released.

In a damning indictment of Anglo American and Grasree management, the inquest found that basic record keeping at the mine was “grossly deficient” and that McGuire’s death “could have been avoided.”

The inquest revealed that McGuire was killed after receiving a job order to calibrate a gas monitor in a section of the mine. He died instantly after being hit by poisonous methane gas, following his removal of the single bolt securing the door of a sealed hatch where the monitor was supposed to be located.

The section of the mine where McGuire was sent, however, was disused. The gas monitor had been removed five months earlier and there was no signage on the hatch door or padlock to prevent entry. In addition, only one of the two roads leading to the hatch was closed with “No Road” tape. The more direct route taken by McGuire had no warning signs or barriers.

Coroner David O’Connell said that inadequate checking of completed job cards and lack of updating of the system “directly led to the fatality.” The updating had not occurred, he said, even though “a number of workers had previously flagged the change in location with superiors, it was not translated to the job card system.” O’Connell said he was “perplexed as to why such a dangerous location could not have simple warning signs.”

While the coroner may be “perplexed,” the underlying reason for breaches of rudimentary safety practises is no secret to hundreds of mine workers who regularly observe them and whose concerns are generally unheeded or are suppressed by management.

Time and the allocation of sufficient resources are required to maintain proper health and safety practises, but in the never-ending drive for higher productivity these measures are dropped, inevitably leading to injuries and deaths. As the old adage, close to the hearts of corporate management, goes—“time is money.”

For the corporate elite and its trade union servants, workers’ lives are expendable and certainly not worth much.

Anglo American, whose global operations made \$3.56 billion profit last year, was fined a paltry \$137,500 over McGuire’s tragic death and no one at the company has faced criminal charges. This is despite a string of life-threatening incidents at Anglo American’s coal mines.

In February 2015, a contractor was killed and another was seriously injured by an exploding tyre at the company’s Dawson coal mine—the third fatality in less than 12 months at an Anglo American mine in Queensland.

In February this year, Bradley Hardwick, a 47-year-old grader operator, was killed in a collision with another vehicle at the company’s underground Moranbah North long-wall mine. It followed a substantial roof collapse at the mine the previous month.

While the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) responds to every mine fatality and serious injury with a stock standard finger-

wagging rebuke of the mining corporation concerned, the union works as a virtual public relations office for the industry.

Last year, following a spate of mine and quarry deaths, the Queensland state Labor government, in cahoots with the mining companies, launched a “Safety Reset” plan. This consisted of joint management, union and mine workers meetings at every site to discuss information distributed by Queensland work safety officers.

Rather than exposing this as a damage-control exercise designed to take the heat off the mining companies and their attacks on work safety, the unions heralded “Safety Reset” as a basis for meaningful change.

Last month’s *Courier Mail* contrasted the CFMMEU’s mealy-mouthed criticism of Anglo American after the Grosvenor mine disaster with its the fulsome praise of the company and its participation in the “Safety Reset” farce.

The article contained a letter from CFMMEU Queensland president Stephen Smyth to Grosvenor management which declared: “I have to say that the Grosvenor reset and the leadership was first class.”

Noting that the majority of the mine’s production and trades workforce are either labour hire or contractor, Smyth’s letter stated: “So you would expect that they [the workers] would be a little worried about speaking up. I take this from experience at other operations in similar situations. But this did not stop the workers from speaking frank [sic] about things which I took as a positive and was managed well.”

Grosvenor Mine management obviously released the letter to the media in an attempt to bolster its flagging safety image and deflect from its responsibility for the recent near fatal accident.

The CFMMEU responded to the *Courier Mail* article by denouncing it as “union bashing.” Notwithstanding its protests, the letter points to the close collaboration and back-door relations between the mining unions and the employers.

Smyth’s comments about workers’ “speaking frank” in Safety Reset meetings with Grosvenor Mine management contradict his previous assertions. After the Grosvenor Mine blast accident Smyth said that work arrangements at the mine, and in particular, the prevalence of contract and labour hire workers fearful

of dismissal, “compromised their (workers) ability to be vocal about safety concerns.”

Smyth has claimed to have frequently raised “serious concerns over the use of a casualised labour-hire workforce at Grosvenor mine and safety standards at Anglo’s operations.” This is a cynical attempt to deflect rank-and-file criticism of the union’s complicity in the undermining of health and safety.

A major contributor to inadequate mine safety standards is the replacement of more experienced full-time workers with casual, labour hire and contract workers, a process the unions have enforced through job cuts.

To put an end to the carnage in the mines and other industries, workers need to break with the unions and take matters into their own hands through the establishment of independent rank-and-file organisations that reach out to miners nationally and around the world to fight for the highest safety standards and for full-time well-paid jobs.

Such struggles must be based on a socialist perspective that places the global mining sector under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class so that production can be reorganised to meet social need not profit.



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