

Safety expert removed from Australia's Grosvenor Mine explosion inquiry

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After a methane gas explosion at Anglo American's underground Grosvenor Mine in central Queensland seriously injured five workers in May, the state Labor government went into damage control, announcing an inquiry into the deadly incident.

Four of the men, who sustained horrific burns to their upper torsos and airways, have only just been moved out of intensive care, while the fifth miner was released from hospital in late May. Testifying to the intensity of the blast, he told the media that it melted the workers' helmets and ear plugs and burnt their work clothing.

Queensland mines and energy minister Anthony Lynham claimed that the board of inquiry, to be headed by a retired judge, Terry Martin, would be "an opportunity to continue this government's sweeping reforms to protect mine workers."

Such claims are entirely fraudulent, as the record clearly shows. Before the May disaster there had been a rising toll of deaths and injuries in mines and quarries across the state, including eight fatalities in the 18 months to last December. The carnage continued despite government promises of safety reforms after each tragedy.

In 2018-2019, 1,935 high potential incidents (HPIs) were reported at Queensland mines or around 37 per week. HPIs include fires, equipment failure, theft or other loss of explosives, structural and procedural failures and workers trapped in mines. According to departmental records, the government's Queensland Mines Inspectorate fails to investigate many such incidents.

The Grosvenor Mine inquiry is due to begin early next month. But there are already indications that it will be another cover-up of how safety is subordinated to the companies' ruthless drive for profits to meet investor and shareholder demands. It is also likely to

avoid probing to what extent the coal royalties that flow into state coffers—an estimated \$4.3 billion last year—influence the government's relationship with the coal giants.

Australian National University health and safety expert Professor Andrew Hopkins was forced to recuse himself from the inquiry following a complaint by Anglo American over an interview he gave after the Grosvenor Mine explosion but before his appointment to the inquiry.

In the interview Hopkins made the telling observation that there existed striking similarities in conditions leading up to the Grosvenor explosion with those before the 1994 BHP Moura disaster, also in central Queensland, where 11 miners were killed in a deadly methane gas blast.

Hopkins stated: "It seems there were consistently high levels of methane gas being recorded at that mine [Grosvenor], explosive levels of methane gas, and this was apparently one of the main causes of this accident. This was known beforehand, there were concerns raised beforehand, and nothing effective was done. In that respect, this was very like the Moura accident."

Hopkins said this was part of "a pattern which is present in almost every accident I have studied, that there are warning signs, tell-tale signs, people at the grassroots will speak about." He added: "This was an accident waiting to happen, but nothing was done about it. It falls into that pattern in a very tragic way."

Anglo, whose major concern, like all the mining giants, has been to extricate itself from any responsibility for such disasters, rushed in to engineer Hopkins' removal.

Hopkins' accurate account of the Moura experience is all the more important because when Lynham announced the Grosvenor inquiry he lauded the Mine

Wardens Inquiry into the Moura tragedy for having “recommended safety measures that still protect mine workers today and that have no doubt prevented further incidents and saved lives over the past two decades.”

The Moura 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 provided a green light to mining companies that they could continue to undermine and ignore workers’ safety with impunity.

The state government has replaced Hopkins with Andrew Clough, who held leading positions in the mining inspectorate but has also worked at senior management levels and for major mining companies such as Peabody, Vale and BHP Billiton.

Anglo American is opposed to even the most minimal safety requirements that may increase operational costs. According to an article in the *Australian* on July 3, Anglo’s chief executive of metallurgical coal Tyler Mitchelson held a teleconference with Lynham in April in which he pressed the minister to relax recently introduced rules for monitoring methane in coal mines.

Earlier in April, the Queensland mine inspectorate had directed Anglo’s Grosvenor and Grasstree mines to briefly suspend operations until the managements complied with regulations on underground methane monitors.

The fact Mitchelson has a direct line to the minister underscores the close relations between the mining companies and the Labor government. With the public spotlight on the string of coal mine fatalities, Lynham denied Mitchelson’s request. However, the coal chief still complained that his company had not been consulted before the new monitoring requirements, leaving no doubt that Anglo expects to be able to veto any future changes.

Since the May disaster, the mining unions have pointed to the conditions at the Grosvenor Mine, with about 400 workers employed through labour-hire contractor One Key Resource who fear losing their jobs if they make safety complaints.

This situation is rife across the mining sector, facilitated by union-negotiated work contracts. Labour hire and other forms of insecure work now account for

close to 65 percent of the Queensland coal mining workforce.

The unions are just as culpable for the rising death and injury toll as the companies and the government. The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union was aware of the hazardous conditions in the Grosvenor Mine, having admitted after the blast that workers had raised concerns about high gas levels, but failed to act to halt production.

The carnage will not end until workers take matters into their own hands and build new organisations of struggle that will vigorously enforce safety and basic conditions. This will form part of the fight to totally re-organise society along socialist lines, so that production is placed under workers’ control to meet social need, not private profit.



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