

Australia's Queensland Labor government suspends public hearings of Grosvenor Mine disaster inquiry

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28 September 2020

The real purpose behind the calling by the Queensland Labor government of a special Board of Inquiry into the methane gas explosion at Anglo American's underground coal Grosvenor Mine in central Queensland on May 6 this year has become increasingly clear in the weeks since proceedings began early last month.

The explosion that ripped through the mine seriously injured five mine workers. Four sustained horrific burns to their upper torsos and airways. The fifth miner, who also suffered significant injuries and trauma, was released from hospital in late May.

When Queensland Mines and Energy Minister Dr. Anthony Lynham announced on May 21 that the government would call the Board of Inquiry to be headed by retired judge Terry Martin, he promised it would "conduct public hearings, call witnesses and make broad inquiries" in relation to the Grosvenor Mine tragedy, as well as 40 other incidents relating to the principal hazard of methane gas.

Lynham also pledged the inquiry "would determine the nature and cause of each" and bring down its finding by November 30 this year. He claimed the inquiry would draw up recommendations for improving safety and health practices across the mining sector "to mitigate against the risk of these incidents happening again."

Subsequent developments, however, reveal that these pledges were a cynical fraud. Like other government-initiated inquiries into industrial disasters, the Grosvenor Mine inquiry is shown to be a damage control exercise called to hose down widespread public outrage that erupted in the wake of the Grosvenor explosion. This disaster followed multiple fatalities and life threatening accidents in Queensland mines and quarries.

The government's real aim in calling the board of inquiry was to gain time to organise a cover-up and

prevent any genuine investigation of the underlying causes of all such disasters that ultimately lie in the subordination of safety by corporations to the drive to bolster profits and shareholder values.

The cover up agenda was embedded in the very structure of the inquiry. The first tranche of the inquiry hearings began in August. However, this did not collect or consider any evidence relating directly to the May 6 Grosvenor mine explosion.

This tranche was restricted to examining more general issues associated with the mining sector such as industry and site safety, health representatives, and how the management structure and employment arrangements may impact on mine safety. It also touched on incidents of methane exceedances (when gas concentrations rise to dangerous levels) at four other Queensland mines, Grasree, Moranbah North and Oaky North.

A second tranche, scheduled to commence on September 15, was supposed to examine the causes that led to the catastrophic incident at the Grosvenor mine. However, in an extraordinary statement on September 11, inquiry chairman Terry Martin seized on a series of technicalities and delays by government departments to justify postponing further any public hearings into both the May explosion and 27 other methane gas related incidents that had occurred at the Grosvenor Mine itself.

Martin acknowledged that when the board of inquiry was announced on May 21, it had been stated that all evidence relating to the causes of the Grosvenor explosion would be called in public hearings commencing September 15. Martin, however, went on to claim: "That is no longer possible."

Offering a highly convoluted justification for his decision, Martin claimed that the Queensland mine regulator had not concluded its investigation into the

Grosvenor Mine explosion, therefore the Work Health and Safety Prosecutor was unable to confirm if there was potential for laying any charges. He then claimed that because of this, numbers of witnesses had informed the board of inquiry that they would refuse to answer questions because doing so may tend to incriminate them.

Stating unequivocally that the witnesses “refusal to answer such questions is justified,” Martin concluded that the board “cannot, at this stage, meaningfully inquire into the 27 methane exceedances (at the Grosvenor Mine) or the serious accident at Grosvenor Mine.”

While assuring that the board would continue to receive and consider evidence “from expert reports and public submissions,” Martin then ruled that any further public hearings “will be listed for no earlier than mid-March 2021.”

It is also no accident that the state Labor government’s move to suspend public hearings comes just prior to the pending state election in October. With growing popular discontent over mounting job losses and public sector wage cuts amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and in an election where the loss of just two seats would cost the government its majority, Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk was anxious to take the spotlight off the government’s scandalous record on mine safety.

In this, Palaszczuk is being fully backed by the mining unions. When Lynham announced the board of inquiry in the wake of the Grosvenor Mine explosion, the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) rushed to herald it as “an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events.”

The CFMMEU has not moved an inch from this position even as it became increasingly clear that no such examination was to take place and that a cover up was underway. On September 11, the same day that Martin announced the suspension of further public hearings, the CFMMEU issued a fawning statement declaring the union’s disappointment over Lynham’s announced of his “retirement from politics at the upcoming election.”

The statement praised the outgoing minister for his supposed contribution to safety in the mining industry, fraudulently declaring: “Lynham’s leadership has made a real difference and we thank him for making sure mineworkers’ voices have been heard—including through the wide-ranging Queensland Coal Mining Board of Inquiry which he established.”

In reality, even before organising the Grosvenor Mine cover-up operation, Lynham and the Queensland Labor

government had consistently defended the mining companies, even in the face of a rising death toll including eight fatalities in the 18 months to December last year.

Labor’s close collaboration with the mining giants is in part driven by the fact that the government counts on coal mining royalties to meet budgetary requirements. These were estimated to be \$4.3 billion last year—a substantial amount, but a drop in the ocean compared to the multi-billion dollars that go annually into the coffers of the mining companies.

Labor, along with previous state governments, has also overseen the escalating casualisation of the mining sector workforce and the large miners’ increasing use of contract hire companies that experts have identified as a major contributor to mining deaths and injuries.

Over the years, assisted by the mining unions that worked to suppress workers’ opposition to job cuts, the once better trained permanent workforce has been increasingly replaced by less experienced contract hire workers.

Moreover, the precarious position of casual workers, whose employment can be readily terminated by contract hire companies, has produced a situation where such workers are highly reluctant to report safety concerns out of fear of losing their jobs.

Whichever big business party comes to power in the October Queensland state elections, Labor or Liberal National, the undermining of safety in the mining sector and across industry generally will continue unabated.

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



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