

Australian Grosvenor Mine disaster inquiry further exposed as an official cover-up

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Further evidence has emerged that the Queensland Labor government's establishment of a special Board of Inquiry into a methane gas explosion at Anglo-American's underground Grosvenor coal mine last May is part of an official cover-up.

When the inquiry was announced, then mines and resources minister Anthony Lynham said it would "determine the nature and cause" of the central Queensland blast, which seriously injured five workers, as well as 40 other incidents relating to the hazard of methane gas.

The real character of the inquiry as a whitewash, however, was demonstrated by statements to the media in December from its chairperson, retired district judge Terry Martin.

Martin revealed he had contacted Lynham in late August, requesting that the government introduce amendments to current state laws that would empower the inquiry to compel witnesses to give all relevant evidence. He warned that if the changes he advocated were not enacted it would seriously compromise the inquiry and its ability to ever establish the cause of the Grosvenor Mine disaster.

Under the current legislation, persons, including management, can refuse to provide evidence to state inquiries by claiming a right to silence so evidence cannot be gathered that may be used against them in future criminal or civil proceedings. Martin's proposal was for state inquiries to be given the power to compel witnesses to testify fully while including safeguards to protect them against any future use of such evidence.

In an earlier statement, Martin confirmed that many potential witnesses, including those employed by Anglo-American, refused to provide evidence by invoking the privilege against self-incrimination. Martin's warning was ignored by Lynham who has since retired.

His successor, Scott Stewart, responded to the December media reports by ruling out any changes to current laws before the Grosvenor inquiry handed down its final report, which is due before May 31.

In other words, Stewart is acting to ensure a final report will not reveal the real cause of the Grosvenor Mine explosion or determine who bears responsibility for the disaster that has had such a devastating impact on the injured workers and their families.

Stewart's decision is the latest in a series of cynical manoeuvres by the state Labor government.

In September, Martin announced that he had no choice but to postpone any further public hearings of the inquiry until March, 2021, despite the government's earlier promise that all evidence would be given in public.

Significantly, the postponement came on the eve of the second tranche of the inquiry on September 15 and due to take specific evidence on the Grosvenor disaster.

The earlier public hearings were restricted to general issues associated with the mining sector such as industry and site safety and health representatives. The aim was to take the spotlight off the accident and gain time to continue the government cover-up.

It is now clear that the government, through its departments and agencies, had been working to ensure that the final stage of inquiry is conducted behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny.

When he announced the postponement of further public hearings in September, Martin claimed that it was not possible to proceed with them because the Queensland mine regulator had not concluded its investigation into the mine explosion. This meant that the state Work Health and Safety Prosecutor was unable to confirm if there was potential for laying any charges. As a result, numbers of witnesses informed the

board of inquiry that they would refuse to answer questions because doing so may tend to incriminate them.

State authorities, however, have no intention of laying charges. In one industrial disaster after another major corporations and their senior personnel have been absolved of any criminal responsibility, even when malpractices have been exposed as the cause. The regulator has dragged out its investigation to provide potential witnesses to the inquiry with a means of refusing to testify.

When it was called, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), hailed the inquiry as “an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events.” Since the proceedings have been exposed as a sham, the union has done everything it can to bolster illusions in the inquiry.

A December 18 article on the CFMEU website made no mention of the ending of public hearings or any of the government’s other shoddy manoeuvres to perpetrate a cover up. Instead, Stephen Smyth, president of the union’s Queensland mining and energy division declared that coal miners were “looking forward to the release of the Board’s final report next year.” “It is important that this important enquiry continues and that it leaves no stone unturned regarding what happened leading up to May 6,” Smyth stated.

The CFMEU, like the government, has a vested interest in preventing any exposure of the real causes of the disaster because of the union’s own role in undermining safety and creating the conditions that have resulted in numerous coal mining injuries and fatalities.

The union, working with governments and the major companies, has overseen the massive casualisation of the mining sector. This resulted in much of the production workforce at the Grosvenor Mine being employed as casuals from labour hire firms. At the same time, it has enforced continued production, as state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, have gutted the mines inspectorate and basic safety measures have been abandoned.

The CFMEU’s main concern, as always, is to maintain its role as a labour bargaining agency and an industrial police force of management, from which the union officialdom derives its privileges. According to a

recent report in the *Australian*, more than half of the 59 union officials who declared annual salaries higher than \$200,000 were from the CFMEU.

The record shows that the carnage in the mining sector will not end until workers take matters into their own hands and build rank-and-file organisations of struggle independent of the unions that will vigorously enforce safety and basic conditions.

Above all, a new political perspective is required. The spate of industrial accidents over recent years is the direct outcome of the subordination of workers’ rights and safety to the profit demands of the financial elite. The alternative is the fight for a workers’ government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the mines, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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