

# Injured worker gives damning evidence to inquiry into Australia's Grosvenor Mine disaster

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In a display of courage, miner Wayne Sellars gave powerful evidence to the Coal Mine Board of Inquiry on April 7, shedding light on the methane gas blast at Anglo American's underground Grosvenor Mine in Central Queensland on May 6 last year.

Sellars was one of five workers who sustained horrific injuries from the explosion when they were engulfed in flames that ripped through the tailgate area of the mine's Longwall 104 operation. He suffered burns to 70 percent of his body as well as kidney failure for which he had to receive dialysis.

Sellars spent three weeks in the Moranbah Hospital Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and then a further six in Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital's burns unit. After being discharged he was readmitted due to the development of blood clots on his lungs.

He underwent 10 surgeries with three more rounds of laser surgery scheduled for this year, as well as hand and ear reconstructions. "It was the last thing I expected to happen," Sellars told the inquiry, "I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

Sellars has worked in the coal mining industry for 13 years and at the Grosvenor Mine since 2014, where he was employed as a shearer-driver cutting coal on the mine's longwall face. At the time of the deadly incident he was employed by labour-hire company One Key Resources.

Demonstrating the high levels of casualisation that exists across the sector, Sellars testified that despite his many years at Grosvenor, he, like the majority of the workforce, was never directly employed by Anglo as a permanent employee.

Recounting what happened on May 6, Sellars provided a terrifying picture of the blast and its aftermath. His evidence, moreover, pointed to the deadly conditions that

existed in the mine prior to the explosion, including the high presence of methane and of management's dismissal of workers concerns.

Just prior to the explosion, two workers had arrived to relieve Sellars so he could go to lunch when a first initial pressure wave came through. The wave was possibly caused by a large displacement of methane gas in air by a roof strata collapse in the gulf—a part of the mine where the coal had previously been worked away and the space filled with caved rock.

Sellars stated that the force of the first pressure wave was "like standing in a cyclone. It took us by surprise." Around ten seconds later a second much stronger wave came through. It ignited, engulfing the men in flames. "It was like standing in a blowtorch for a split-second," Sellars explained.

Sellars said he could hear one of the workers screaming behind him. As Sellars was making his way out of the mine, another worker who had just entered told him he was on fire and tried to pat out the flames.

Having managed to exit the mine, the injured workers were taken to the medical office, put on stretchers by first responders and then rushed to Moranbah Hospital.

Sellars testified to the precarious conditions in the mine in the weeks leading up to the explosion and other safety incidents demonstrating that Anglo's overall concern was maintaining maximum production.

He said that while working on different shifts he had witnessed methane coming up through the floor of the longwall area "for quite some time."

In the eight weeks prior to the May 6 blast there had been 14 reported high potential incidents (HPIs) of methane exceedance, known in the industry as near misses, at longwall 104 and other locations. Sellars told the inquiry that during HPI incidents, his crew was never

once evacuated off the longwall face.

Sellars said that management's response to workers' warning of the methane levels had not been satisfactory on several occasions. "They'd [management] come back, and they'd tell us to keep going. You get frustrated."

Sellars' testimony pointed to management's negative response to other necessary safety measures asked for by workers, which if undertaken would have impacted production. This included requests for a change in production methods to better handle strata problems in the coal face.

The method favoured by management is known as Bi-di. This involves the shearer cutting coal in both directions on the long wall, thereby yielding high levels of production, but it requires men to work behind the shearer.

Sellars said that when encountering serious strata problems, workers would at times request a change to Uni-di, cutting in one direction, a method that allows workers "to stay out of coal dust, out of a bad roof area and provides a better vision of what is occurring with the roof conditions."

Sellars said that requests to change to Uni-di were not always acceded to. He also confirmed that on the occasions when Uni-di cutting was allowed, management instructed workers to revert to Bi-di "ASAP" even when workers asked to continue with the safer method.

Sellars' testimony also dealt with a measure known as pumping, which was requested by workers for safety reasons when they observed worsening conditions such as developing cavities. It involves pumping a glue-like substance into cavities to seal them so as to consolidate the coal face and prevent strata falls. However, this requires that production be paused.

Sellars confirmed that workers requests for pumping were not agreed to by management "all the time." Moreover, to limit downtime, management would sometimes pull the pumping process up short, not filling all the holes and cavities. Asked by Council "what is the downside, if any, of pumping if that is going to maximise safety for workers," Sellars replied, "just time and money."

Sellars' determination to bring the truth to public attention stands in sharp contrast to the roles of Anglo American, the Queensland state Labor government and the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU), all of which are seeking to orchestrate a cover-up.

Anglo has seized on a legality to prevent management

from being compelled to give evidence to the inquiry. Under existing legislation, witnesses can claim the right to silence so evidence cannot be gathered that may be used against them in future criminal or civil proceedings.

The Queensland Labor government refused a request last August by inquiry head Terry Martin to amend state laws to empower the investigation to compel witnesses to appear with safeguards protecting them against any future use of such evidence. He warned that without the change, the ability of the inquiry to establish the cause of the disaster would be seriously compromised.

The CFMMEU is as anxious as the company that no genuine probing take place, as this would expose the union's decades-long collaboration with the mining companies in undermining working conditions. The union has presided over the massive growth in the use of casual and contract labour at mines across the country, and works closely with management to ensure continued production, even when workers raise safety concerns.

The CFMMEU has promoted the inquiry as "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events," even as it is clear that the company and the state government are collaborating to suppress information.

The line-up demonstrates that the fight for decent conditions, including safety, and for the truth, can only go forward if workers begin organising independently of the unions, the Labor Party and the corporate profit interests that they defend.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party appeal to miners at Grosvenor and throughout the country to contact us today to discuss the way forward, and to share information of your own experiences, including the rampant safety violations in the sector.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**