

Australian union petition over Grosvenor Mine disaster a cynical diversion

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Over 200 miners at Anglo-American's underground Grosvenor Mine, amounting to around 75 percent of the workforce, have signed a petition calling for the dismissal of the site's senior leadership team. The mine, located in Central Queensland, was the site of a massive methane gas explosion on May 6 last year that left five workers with horrific injuries.

The petition, instigated by the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), declares that since the explosion, management at Grosvenor "have given us no reason to believe they have addressed the culture of poor safety or that they have put in place measures that will prevent a repeat disaster."

There can be no doubt that the overwhelming response to the petition by workers expresses their deep felt anger over unsafe conditions at the mine and the desire to ensure that those responsible for the May 6 disaster are held fully accountable. The motives of the CFMMEU, however, are very different.

The timing of the petition is significant. It comes as the second tranche of hearings at the Board of Inquiry into the disaster have been adjourned, with a final report to be handed to the Queensland state Labor government by May 31.

The inquiry, which has received the enthusiastic backing of the CFMMEU, is a cynical attempt at damage control. Its purpose has been to damp-down widespread public outrage over the explosion, and the conditions that have resulted in multiple fatalities and life threatening accidents across Queensland's mines and quarries.

Like all such official investigations into industrial disasters, the Board of Inquiry was designed to take the spotlight off the Labor government's own scandalous record on mine safety and prevent any genuine probing of the underlying causes of the May 6 disaster that ultimately lie in the subordination of safety to the drive for profit. The immediate aim has been to absolve the company and the government of responsibility.

This agenda became increasingly clear as the inquiry

proceeded. Hence the CFMMEU's sudden attempt to distance itself from the farce that it heralded when the inquiry was announced mid-last year as "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events."

In the petition the union notes "that members of the senior leadership team opted not to appear before the board of inquiry, claiming self-incrimination. This has added greatly to our fears of the senior management not being open and transparent about what happened in 2020."

Just who does the CFMMEU think it is kidding? Did the union leadership really believe for a minute that the inquiry would result in an "open and transparent" disclosure of the conditions that resulted in the May 6 tragedy?

Anglo-American managers began refusing to testify on the grounds of self-incrimination in August, just months into the inquiry. The CFMMEU, however, treats this as though it were a shocking new revelation.

The preparations for a cover-up, moreover, were apparent from last July when Australian National University health and safety expert Professor Andrew Hopkins was forced to recuse himself from the inquiry. This demand of Anglo-American, supported by the Queensland Labor government, was never opposed by the CFMMEU.

Hopkins' removal came after a media interview, in which he rightly compared what had occurred at Grosvenor to the 1994 BHP Moura disaster in which 11 miners died. "It seems," Hopkins stated, "that there were consistently high levels of methane gas being recorded at that mine [in 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. This was an accident waiting to happen, but nothing was done about it."

The truth of these observations was confirmed by compelling evidence to the inquiry given by injured miner Wayne Sellars on April 7. He pointed to the precarious conditions in the mine in the weeks leading up to the

explosion including the high presence of methane in the area of the long wall operation. Sellars also spoke of the unsatisfactory response of management to other safety concerns raised by workers. In some cases, requested measures were not undertaken, apparently because of the impact they would have had on production.

The CFMMEU, which has members at Grosvenor, would have known about the dangerous conditions in the mine, but clearly did nothing to prevent the “accident waiting to happen.” The union also knew from the outset that the Board of Inquiry was called for the purpose of orchestrating a cover-up and were in full support of this agenda. This is why the union has continued to participate in it, even as management has refused to give full testimony.

The CFMMEU was as anxious as the government and the company to ensure a cover-up so as to prevent any critical examination of its own role in undermining safety. This record includes overseeing ever greater levels of casualisation in the mining workforce, and enforcing the introduction of ever more onerous shifts and around-the-clock working hours, all of which are major contributors to the undermining of safety.

Assisting the coal companies to impose such conditions, the CFMMEU has systematically sought to isolate and betray every attempt by miners to oppose the decades-long assault on jobs and working conditions, as well as the gutting of safety standards.

In dispute after dispute, the CFMMEU has acted as the indispensable industrial policemen for the mining companies, suppressing workers’ opposition by enforcing the anti-strike provisions of the draconian Fair Work industrial laws introduced by Labor in 2009 with full union support.

Among the struggles sold out by the union was the protracted fight in defence of conditions by workers locked out at Glencore’s Oaky Creek coal mine in Queensland in 2018. One year before, the union worked to impose an agreement at Griffin Coal in Western Australia that slashed pay rates by 25 percent and ripped up other conditions. Such betrayals have set new exploitative benchmarks to be imposed across the coal mining sector.

One other warning must be made regarding the CFMMEU’s decision to issue the petition. Operations at the Grosvenor mine are currently suspended. The company is looking to restart production at the mine by at least the second half of this year, a schedule that would no doubt have raised consternation among mine workers.

The CFMMEU’s call for the replacement of the current “leadership team,” could well be used for a cosmetic facelift aimed at ensuring a restart at the mine.

Anglo-American responded to the petition by declaring

that the CFMMEU officials have “open door with management to make any suggestions to improve safety.”

In effect, the union has operated as a wing of management, collaborating with it behind the backs of workers, ensuring that production continues, regardless of unsafe conditions, and then collaborating in the whitewash of an inquiry. The CFMMEU’s newfound hostility to management is an attempt to cover this up, as well as the responsibility of its allies in the big business Labor government, who have presided over the lax safety regime.

The issues confronting miners will not be resolved through the replacement of one set of managers with another. The experiences at Grosvenor and throughout the industry have demonstrated that basic social rights, including to a safe working environment, are incompatible with the insatiable drive for profit.

The fight for decent conditions and safety measures must be directed against all of those who defend the subordination of production to profit, from the companies, to Labor and the unions. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, must be established to enforce safety, and to coordinate a joint struggle throughout the sector against the decades-long undermining of basic conditions.

The necessity of a socialist perspective, aimed at placing the major mining companies under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, to meet social need, not corporate profit interests, is directly posed.

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