

Board of Inquiry hands down report into Australia's Grosvenor mine disaster

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A Queensland Board of Inquiry this month delivered to the state's Labor government its final report on the methane gas explosion at Anglo American's underground Grosvenor Mine on May 6 last year that left five mineworkers with horrific injuries.

A second tranche of hearings, which began this March, also looked into 27 high potential methane incidents that occurred at the central Queensland mine between July 1, 2019 and May 5, 2020.

A board spokesperson said it had conducted an "independent and thorough investigation." The truth is that the inquiry was anything other than "independent" and its investigation was far from "thorough."

That is because the inquiry was called by the Queensland state Labor government of Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, which has close relations with the coal giants that provide royalties to the state's coffers estimated at \$4.3 billion in 2019. In that year, the Labor government froze any increase in coal royalties until October 2024. These payments are only a miniscule percentage of the gigantic profits extracted from the state's coal resources.

The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) hailed the inquiry as "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events." In reality, it was a damage-control operation, aimed at containing the widespread outrage that emerged in the wake of the disaster.

Even before the inquiry began last year, Anglo seized on a legality to prevent its management from being compelled to give evidence. Under the state's legislation, witnesses can claim the right to silence so evidence cannot be used against them in future criminal or civil proceedings.

In the inquiry's terms of reference, the government

insisted that the "board is to conduct its inquiry and deal with any evidence it may receive in such a way as to minimise, so far as possible, a person's exposure to reprisal of the kind mentioned in section 275AA (of the Queensland Mining and Safety Act)."

The inquiry's head, retired district court judge Terry Martin, asked the government last August to amend the law in order to compel witnesses to appear, with safeguards protecting them against any future use of their evidence.

Martin warned that without this change the inquiry "would be seriously compromised," along with "its ability to ever establish the cause of the Grosvenor Mine disaster." Determined to protect Anglo, Minister for Resources Scott Stewart refused Martin's request.

At the conclusion of the inquiry, Stewart stated that the "health and safety of all workers is paramount for the Palaszczuk government." He said Queensland "now has the toughest mine safety and health laws in the world."

Such claims are entirely fraudulent, as the record plainly shows. Before the Grosvenor 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 December 2019.

The trade unions, including the CFMMEU, insisted that the introduction of industrial manslaughter laws in Queensland in 2017 would act as a deterrent to companies and prevent such deaths. These laws were only extended to the mining and resources sector in 2020, and convictions have been all but non-existent.

The first-ever conviction was in June 2020, when the directors of a small auto recycling company were fined \$3 million and given a 10-month suspended sentence for the death of a worker.

According to the Board of Inquiry spokesperson, the

second and final report includes “findings as to the nature and cause of the serious accident that occurred at Grosvenor mine” and “recommendations aimed at improving safety and health practices and procedures across Queensland coal mines.” It also features “findings and recommendations in respect of labour hire arrangements.”

These will not impose any genuine restrictions on the growing use of labour hire, a major contributor in undermining safety. Some 60 percent of workers in major mining operations are now employed via labour hire, including the entire Grosvenor mine workforce.

This is only possible because the CFMMEU and other mining unions have contained and suppressed opposition by workers.

Anglo has been permitted by the state government’s regulator, Resources Safety and Health Queensland, to recommence mining operations at Grosvenor, and at its nearby Moranbah North mine, where operations were suspended in February due to elevated gas readings.

The CFMMEU has taken no action to stop the recommencements, despite a petition, signed by 200 miners, or 75 percent of the Grosvenor workforce, saying the mine’s management “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.”

In fact, the CFMMEU designed the petition to provide the company with a means of overcoming the workers’ opposition to the restarting of operations by calling for the removal of the site “leadership team” as a precondition for reopening.

Anglo recently threw a bone in this direction by reportedly shifting a leading senior site executive to another role. The managerial shuffle is window dressing that changes nothing fundamentally. The new executive, like the last one, will implement the requirements of Anglo American, which subordinate every aspect of the work process to the ruthless drive for profit.

The carnage will not end until workers take matters into their own hands and build a network of rank-and-file organisations across the mining sector in Australia and internationally, completely independent of the pro-company unions.

These committees will vigorously enforce safety and basic conditions and mobilise an industrial and political

counter-offensive to defend jobs and working conditions. This struggle is bound up with the fight for socialist policies, including placing the mines, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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