

Australian mine disaster inquiry finds Anglo American exposed workers to “unacceptable risk”

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A Board of Inquiry report into the methane gas explosion at Anglo American’s underground Grosvenor coal mine in central Queensland on May 6, 2020, which left five mineworkers with horrific injuries, has again pointed to the subordination of safety to profit.

The Queensland state Labor Party government convened the inquiry as a damage-control exercise to contain widespread outrage over the disaster, coming on top of previous multiple deaths in the state’s mines. The government sought to whitewash its own responsibility for the disaster, alongside that of the company.

However, even in the highly-orchestrated proceedings of a government inquiry it sometimes proves impossible to completely suppress evidence that points to the underlying cause of such disasters—the drive for production to maximise investment returns.

The inquiry’s final report, released last week, confirms that the company knowingly gambled with workers’ lives by enforcing a rate of production that continually produced methane gas levels exceeding the capacity of the mine’s gas drainage system. This created one of the essential components that produced the May 6 disaster.

Grosvenor’s gas drainage system, at best, could only handle gas levels generated from the mining of 10,000 tonnes of coal daily. However, production from the mine’s long wall 104 (LW104) was frequently in the range of 15,000 to 20,000 tonnes, and sometimes up to 28,000 tonnes a day.

Not only did Anglo refuse to cap production to a safe level. When it began mining LW104, it implemented a system known as bi-directional mining. This involves

shearers cutting coal in both directions on the long wall to yield higher levels of production. That would have contributed to a further elevation of gas levels.

Moreover, Anglo abandoned a series of essential safeguards designed to manage gas levels that would have taken considerable time to implement and delayed the start-up of production on LW104.

These safeguards included the pre-gas drainage of the actual seam being worked and the development of an effective strategy to divert gas being generated from coal seams surrounding LW104 as cutting on the long wall proceeded.

Also, the company did not carry out the required specific spontaneous combustion risk assessment, either prior to starting production on LW104 or at any time during its operation.

Moreover, the company did not inform the state’s Inspectorate of Mines, which supposedly enforces safety, of its failure to carry out these measures. Even so, it is incomprehensible that the inspectorate, which admits its officials were in constant discussions with the company, had no inkling of these deadly decisions of management.

The inspectorate was fully aware of continuous dangerous gas exceedances and high potential incidents (HPIs), known in the industry as near misses, during work on the mine’s previous LW103 operation. Inspectorate officials also knew of unceasing problems with the company’s gas management at the mine since 2016.

The inquiry found that almost every case of gas exceedance on LW103 was caused by the company pushing levels of production that went beyond the capacity of the gas drainage system.

Gas levels from LW104's operation were at least 65 percent higher than those at LW103. Why then did the inspectorate not carry out a thorough investigation before allowing work to commence on LW104?

The answer is to some degree implied in the extraordinary statement to the inquiry made on behalf of the inspectorate by its regional inspector, Stephen Smith. While admitting to knowing the history of continuous gas exceedances at the mine, Smith said information provided during "interaction between the inspectorate and the mine" indicated that "the mine's actions in managing these issues was generally effective."

In other words, the inspectorate relied on information fed to it by the company.

Ultimately, the inquiry found that Anglo had repeatedly subjected the Grosvenor workers "to an unacceptable level of risk," including in the months leading up to the explosion. The report also conceded that the inspectorate "did not give LW104 the attention it warranted."

The inquiry, however, still attempted to downplay the inspectorate's culpability, only saying the agency's "appraisal of Grosvenor's capabilities with respect to methane management was inappropriate."

The inspectorate's close working relationship with Anglo can be understood only as an outcome of the pro-business Labor government's own intimate association with the mining companies.

Relying heavily on mining royalties, the government has backed the companies' drive to slash costs through jobs cuts and ever-greater casualisation. Reflecting the situation throughout the state's coal mines, some 76 percent of Grosvenor's workforce were contractors or labour hire workers.

Miners have persistently raised that insecure forms of employment act as a deterrent to workers raising safety concerns, out of fear of dismissal by the contract companies. Yet the inquiry said this was a mere "perception among coal mine workers."

While saying there is "scope to improve the mechanisms for safety issues to be raised by workers," nothing in the inquiry's recommendations would in any way inhibit ever-greater casualisation.

Despite the revelations of Anglo's culpability in undermining safety, the inquiry's findings effectively leave safety in the hands of the company. For example,

the report calls on the company to conduct reviews into the effectiveness of gas management, methane drainage, operational practices and management systems. Such recommendations are akin to putting a fox in charge of a hen house.

Construction Forestry Mining, Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) Queensland president Stephen Smyth declared that the report's most "shocking thing" was the detailed account of Anglo's failure to manage dangerous gases at Grosvenor or slow production following high potential incidents during the two previous months.

There can be no doubt, however, that workers would have informed the CFMMEU about the dangerous conditions that existed over an extended period, but the union did nothing to prevent the disaster waiting to happen.

Attempting to lend credence to the inquiry's totally ineffective and empty recommendations, Smyth declared the union "would work hard to make sure the inquiry's findings lead to systemic improvements in the industry—including employment practices."

The outcome of the inquiry demonstrates again that there will be no "systemic improvements" to end the fatalities and injuries until workers take matters into their own hands. The pressing need is for the building of a network of rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union, to vigorously enforce safety and fight the assault on 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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