

Miner killed in roof collapse at Australian underground coal mine

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The notoriously unsafe conditions across Queensland's coal mining sector resulted in yet another fatality on September 14, when 60-year-old worker Graham Dawson was crushed in a roof collapse at the underground Sojitz-owned Gregory Crinum Coal Mine in Lilyvale, 60 kilometres northeast of Emerald.

Dawson was one of three maintenance workers re-bolting the roof in the mine's conveyor drift area at the time of the incident. A 25-year-old worker who was trapped in rubble for more than four hours sustained serious leg and pelvis crush injuries and had to be airlifted to the Rockhampton Base Hospital. The third worker suffered a "medical event" requiring him to be hospitalised but has since been discharged.

The Japanese-owned trading company Sojitz acquired the 24-year-old Gregory Crinum coking coal mine from Australian mining giant BHP and the Mitsubishi Corporation in 2018 for \$A100 million. The mine had been closed in 2016.

In May this year, Sojitz engaged Mackay-based mining services company Mastermyne on a seven-year contract to prepare and operate the mine. The company's plan was to have the mine fully operational by the end of this year. With a contract workforce numbering 180, the company expected to extract 1.5–1.8 million tonnes of metallurgical coal each year, delivering an estimated \$A80–100 million in annual revenue.

Crinum is Mastermyne's first "Whole of Mine Operations" contract, and CEO Tony Caruso made clear that the company has a lot riding on meeting the end-of-year deadline. He described the contract as a "major milestone" that was "significant in transitioning the business into a commercial model that is not only complimentary (sic) to the existing contracting model, but will provide an even greater level of earnings

certainty over the long term."

The financial aspect was certainly recognised in investment circles; Mastermyne shares plummeted 18.55 percent to 90 cents after all recovery operations at Crinum were suspended following this month's fatality.

The unstable condition of the mine's roof has been an issue for many years. Concerns about it were raised by the Queensland Mines Inspectorate in a 2005 Mine Record Entry.

Speaking to the *Australian* last week, former Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) mine safety representative Stuart Vaccaneo, who had conducted an inspection of the Crinum mine in 2001, said its roof consisted of "glorified mud" and had "no inherent strength." Vaccaneo also claimed that the "previous owners knew about the roof issues, looked at it and said it was way too hard and outside their acceptable risk profile. It's been sitting there since."

In the wake of the fatality, and before the CFMEU announced it would carry out "an independent investigation," the union's Queensland branch district president Stephen Smyth issued an extraordinary statement, which made no mention of the precarious state of the mine's roof.

Smyth declared that it was his "preliminary" understanding that the workers were carrying out roof support work "which is a common thing, as part of an overall plan to re-establish the mine." He then stated that such work would have been the subject of careful risk assessment and the plan would normally have been reviewed by a geotechnical engineer to ensure the activity was safe. "I'm assuming all that would have been in place," he stated.

Given the safety record of mining and contract hire

companies across the Queensland coal mining sector, which have produced a raft of fatalities and serious injuries, why would Smyth make such an assumption?

Smyth's statement can only be understood as an attempt to head off any examination of Mastermyne's role in the latest tragedy and of the CFMEU itself, which clearly did nothing to prevent work commencing in the mine under conditions tragically revealed to have been dangerous.

The union, working in league with company managements for decades, has played a pivotal role in creating the conditions for such tragedies, including overseeing the ever-greater use of labour-hire and casual workers across the sector, with major consequences for workers' safety.

Acting as an industrial police force, the CFMEU has suppressed all opposition among miners to the relentless corporate assault on jobs and working conditions. In dispute after dispute, the union has upheld Australia's draconian "Fair Work" industrial laws prohibiting virtually all strikes and industrial action. The legislation was introduced in 2009 by the former Labor government with the full support of the country's trade unions, including the CFMEU.

Queensland Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk rushed out a statement following last week's fatality declaring: "I can assure Queenslanders that this matter will be the subject of a thorough investigation by Resources Health and Safety Queensland."

This is nothing more than a ploy to hose down public outrage and prevent any genuine probing of the underlying causes of this tragedy. Countless similar inquiries into mine disasters have done nothing to change the dangerous conditions that plague the industry as a result of the subordination of safety to the drive for profit.

The fatality at Crinum is the ninth death in the Queensland coal mining sector in three years. All occurred after the 2019 launch of a so-called "industry safety reset plan," which was developed by the Palaszczuk government in concert with mining companies and the unions, following a spate of deaths in the state's coal mines and quarries.

The "reset" consisted of nothing more than on-site meetings of management, union bureaucrats and mine workers to discuss information distributed by Queensland work safety officers. The unions, including

the CFMEU, heralded this fraudulent exercise as a basis for meaningful change.

The "reset" did nothing to prevent a methane gas explosion at Anglo American's underground Grosvenor Mine in Central Queensland on May 6 last year, which left five mine workers with horrific injuries.

The Palaszczuk government board of inquiry into the Grosvenor disaster, billed by the CFMEU as "an opportunity for a thorough, wide-ranging and independent examination of the shocking events," brought down its final report in June this year. While the findings confirmed 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, it did not recommend any criminal charges be laid against the company or any of its top executives.

To end the carnage in the mining industry, workers need to take matters into their own hands. This means making a conscious break with the unions and building rank-and-file committees to fight for the highest safety standards and for well-paid full-time jobs.

This struggle is bound up with the fight for a socialist perspective, including placing the mines, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control so that production can be reorganised to meet social need not profit.



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