

Australian mining company issued token fine over mine worker death

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Hamersley Iron, a wholly-owned subsidiary of mining transnational giant Rio Tinto, was recently convicted and fined \$75,000 in a Western Australian court for failing to enforce speed limits, resulting in the death of a worker.

The verdict and fine were handed down on June 27 by the Magistrates Court in South Hedland, more than three and a half years after haul truck driver Daniel Patterson was killed at Hamersley Iron's Channar open cut iron ore mine. Patterson was 28 when he was killed, had been married and was the father of a three-month old child.

The Channar mine is part of a complex of mines in the Greater Paraburdoo iron ore area of Western Australia's mineral-rich Pilbara region. It produces a major proportion of Australia's output, which comprises 13 percent of the world's iron ore production. In 2021 alone, royalties and taxes accruing from the sale of ore, largely to China, contributed \$11.1 billion to the Australian government's budgets.

The \$75,000 fine issued to the mining company is a stark demonstration of the class "justice" meted out by the Australian legal system with regard to workplace safety. It amounts to less than a slap on the wrist for the Rio Tinto subsidiary. Rio Tinto last year made \$21.4 billion in profits globally, amounting to more than \$58 million every day.

Just prior to his death in August 2018, Patterson had been driving a fully loaded electric drive Komatsu 830E A/C haul truck, with a capacity of 230 tonnes, down a ramp designated 84E. Ramp 84E had a decline of 8 to 10 percent and extended for over 1.2 km before ending at a windrow (material lining sides of haul roads) at the bottom of the drive. It had a speed limit of 20 kilometres per hour.

During Patterson's descent, the vehicle's speed

recorder showed his haul truck reaching a speed of 79 kilometres per hour, nearly four times the limit, just before he apparently lost control and crashed into the windrow.

After the crash incident, early reports released by Western Australia's Department of Mines Industry Regulation and Safety said the service brake had not been applied during the truck's descent.

According to a report in NCA NewsWire, state acting WorkSafe Chief Inspector Christina Foley told the Magistrates Court that the risk of trucks gaining excessive speed and getting out of control was well known, given the length and gradient of Channar's ramps.

The court was also told that there were speed detection monitoring devices installed on all Channar's ramps to monitor truck speeds and to report non-compliance, but on ramp 84E they had been turned off two years earlier in 2016, for unknown reasons.

The immediate question as to whether the detection devices were disabled to boost productivity and profits remains unanswered.

Foley told the court "the tragic incident should never have occurred." She reported that, "between February 2014 and August 2018 there had been a number of incidents involving excessive speed on ramps at Channar," and that "Hamersley Iron needed to have more control over the speed descent hazard at Channar and [implement] more effective policies in place to deal with downhill haulage."

One of the prior incidents occurred three months before Patterson's death, when in similar circumstances another haul truck also ran into the windrow bottom of the ramp.

In 2016, another Channar mine worker, Lee Buzzard, was killed. Buzzard, 32, was an experienced Landsdale

diesel fitter and a Rio Tinto employee of 10 years. He was killed while performing maintenance work on a drill head at the mine site.

There is an ongoing record of serious injuries and deaths in the highly profitable mining sector. In 2019 another two mine workers were killed. Western Australian goldfields truck driver Ricky Hansen, 57, was killed at Nova Nickel Copper Mine, and Howard Prosser died while working at the Pilbara's Roy Hill iron ore mine.

In the same year, government officials recorded at least 378 serious incidents in Western Australia's mining sector that resulted in the disabling of workers for two weeks or more, including amputations, crushings, burns, and fractures. This number is likely a substantial underestimate, with many injuries kept secret while workers are paid off not to report incidents.

The trade unions share responsibility for the carnage. The affluent union bureaucracy has organised various deals with the mining giants, while blocking any industrial action in defence of worker health and safety.

The unions' response to each worker death centres on pleas to the mining executives to develop an even closer partnership with them.

After Lee Buzzard's death in 2016, Western Mine Workers Alliance (WMWA), a coalition of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Workers Union, publicly complained that workers were being told to "do more with less."

A spokesman for the unions explained that after recent restructures, Rio had reduced the number of on-site safety experts, specialist trainers, as well as qualified and experienced tradespeople. The unions added that their members had reported that "there had been a significant increase in the levels of management actively discouraging workers who raised safety concerns," and that employees were feeling "significant pressure" and were having their "suitability" for the industry questioned by management if they raised concerns.

None of these issues triggered strikes or any other form of industrial action.

To defend their independent interests, including the basic right to a safe workplace, mining workers need to take matters into their own hands. This means building rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to fight for the highest safety standards and for

decent wages and conditions.

This struggle is bound up with the fight for a socialist perspective, including placing the mines, together 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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