

Australian coal mine fire again exposes deadly working conditions

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A dangerous fire at the Grosvenor coal mine in central Queensland, which burned for the entirety of July, demonstrated the lethal conditions that mining workers are still subjected to under the capitalist system, which subordinates safety concerns to profit considerations.

The Grosvenor fire broke out on June 29 and burned for over a month, up to half a kilometre underground. Near the town of Moranbah, the Anglo American-owned mine is the largest underground coal operation in the state of Queensland. The precise cause of the ignition is yet to be made known, but it occurred on the mine's longwall face.

Fortunately, none of the 150 workers who were on shift at the time were injured, but this can be put down more to the initiative and competence of the workers themselves in the evacuation procedure than any serious effort by Anglo American to protect its workers.

Deadly conditions are not isolated to a single mine. They are found across the mining sector. That was underscored on Saturday when a 48-year-old miner was killed in an accident at the Byerwen surface coal mine, owned by Brisbane-based mining company QCOAL, in north Queensland's Bowen Basin. A Resources Safety and Health Queensland (RSHQ) statement said, "initial reports indicate it involved a pick and carry crane."

The crew working on the Grosvenor longwall had a close call with serious injury or death. The initial flames reportedly shifted away from the workers instead of toward them.

In the event of such a fire, with the threat of gas explosions looming, the workers are required to "self-escape" in perilous conditions. The Grosvenor workers were forced to evacuate in near-complete darkness, as power was cut out to prevent mining equipment from

igniting in case of raised methane levels.

The weeks of efforts to put the fire out consisted of sealing the mine and starving the fire of oxygen by using remotely operated bulldozers to push dirt into the shaft. The Grosvenor mine has a complex network of tunnels as deep as 500 metres underground.

During the first few days of the fire, the locals living in the community were instructed to stay indoors to avoid exposure to smoke released from the mine's ventilation shafts. Nearby residents bore witness to massive clouds of black smoke.

According to Anglo American CEO Duncan Wanblad, the fire is finally believed to be extinguished as of August 1. But the mine will not re-open for some time, leaving its 1,400 employees with an uncertain future. Anglo American has extended their pay until the end of August, while promising to "redeploy staff."

The reality is that they are in limbo. Anglo American is trying to sell the five coal mines it owns in Australia, including Grosvenor. Wanblad has stated that if the longwall section of the mine ever does re-open, it will likely not be under Anglo American's ownership.

In 2020, five workers were severely injured in a methane explosion at the Grosvenor mine. One of those workers, Wayne Sellars, said workers had on numerous occasions raised safety concerns about high methane levels, which the management swiftly dismissed. They would "tell us to keep going," Sellars said.

The Construction Forestry Mining Maritime and Energy Union (CFMMEU) was also aware of the concerns raised by the workers, but failed to take adequate action to ensure their safety.

After the 2020 explosion, the Queensland state Labor government announced an inquiry into the incident, aimed primarily at damage control. Mining and Resources Minister Scott Stewart ruled out legislative

changes proposed by the head of the inquiry Terry Martin to compel witnesses to give all relevant evidence.

As the WSWs reported at the time, Martin warned that without such legal amendments, “the ability of the inquiry to establish the cause of the disaster would be seriously compromised.” Stewart and the Labor government ignored these warnings.

Anglo American demanded that Professor Andrew Hopkins, a health and safety expert from the Australian National University, recuse himself from the inquiry. This occurred after Hopkins gave a media interview in which he highlighted the similarities between the 2020 Grosvenor explosion and a disaster in 1994 that claimed the lives of 11 miners at BHP’s nearby Moura No.2 coal mine.

Hopkins noted that both involved workers raising concerns of high levels of methane gas and “nothing effective was done.” The state Labor government supported the demand for his removal, with not a word of condemnation from the CFMMEU.

Despite all this, the inquiry could not completely cover up Anglo American’s gambling with the health and lives of workers. Some of the key findings included that the mine management “did not cap production to a safe level,” “abandoned a series of essential safeguards designed to manage gas levels” and “did not carry out the required specific spontaneous combustion risk assessment.” However, no charges were brought against Anglo American or any of its executives.

Following the 2020 explosion, over 200 miners at Grosvenor signed a petition calling for the dismissal of the entire senior leadership team. The petition stated that 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.” That assessment has been proven true by the recent fire.

Anglo American and the Labor government are again engaged in damage control and calling for more fraudulent “investigations.” Stewart stated that the government would “be looking at making sure this doesn’t happen again.” But the Labor government, backed by the union leaders, has covered up the causes of such disasters.

According to Safe Work Australia, the mining industry is responsible for around eight deaths per year.

Queensland has a particularly deadly record. When Luke O’Brien, 27, was crushed to death in the fuel-bay area at BHP Mitsubishi Alliance’s (BMA) Saraji Mine, in central Queensland in January, that took the toll to 24 in the past decade. The latest tragedy at Byerwen brings that total to 25.

These are needless and avoidable deaths. In the words of University of Queensland Professor Robin Burgess-Limerick, a researcher with the Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre: “It is definitely possible to mine without fatalities.”

But that possibility cannot be realised within the exploitative capitalist framework. The only way forward is workers to organise independently in rank-and-file committees and join the struggle for a socialist reorganisation of society that puts safety before corporate profits.



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