

# Australia: Coal mine company handed small fine for “alarming” death of worker

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On May 1, amid a wave of workplace deaths in the Australian state of Queensland—seven in the past six months—a judge fined a resources company only \$7 million for the manifestly preventable death of an experienced underground coal worker in central Queensland in 2021.

The relatively small fine—only a fraction of the profits of the employer’s parent company, Mastermyne Group Limited—is another indictment of the official disregard for workers’ lives and safety.

In the district court in Brisbane, the state capital, Judge Jeffrey Clarke found the company guilty of industrial manslaughter due to criminal negligence over the death of a beloved father and grandfather, Graham Dawson, 62.

Dawson was killed in a roof collapse at the Crinum underground mines near the town of Emerald on September 14, 2021. Henare Morgan, who was aged 25 at the time, was seriously injured.

They were carrying out roof support works in a tunnel when the rock around them collapsed and crushed them. Morgan was trapped next to his colleague’s body for hours before being rescued and flown to the hospital with crush injuries to his upper legs.

Court documents allege that shotcrete—effectively sprayed concrete—was used without the combined use of support beams known as steel sets, and without identifying the risks of abandoning the original method of strata support, which had been recommended by specialist expert advice.

The Bowen Basin mine is owned by Japanese firm Sojitz Corporation and operated by Mastermyne Crinum Operations Pty Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Mastermyne Group, whose website describes it as “the country’s leading underground coal mining contractor.”

In handing down the sentence, Judge Clarke said Dawson’s death could have been avoided. During the trial, the court heard Dawson had been on the final night shift of a seven-day swing and had been working to install part of an underground roof support system when the surrounding rock collapsed.

Clarke said there had been an “alarming” lack of consultation about the company’s decision to change its methods, adding there had been “clear warning signs” about the risk. “No coal mine worker should ever be put in the perilous position of working under an [unsupported roof],” he said. Clarke said Mastermyne had not shown any remorse.

The court heard there had been multiple warnings about the

shotcrete process. During the trial, multiple witnesses had noted this was not a common method or one used routinely.

This was Queensland’s first recorded court sentence for industrial manslaughter, since legislation creating the criminal offence came into effect in 2020. The company immediately lodged an appeal, even though the fine amounts to less than a year’s profit.

Mastermyne Group Limited is listed on the Australian Securities Exchange (ASX) under the Metals & Mining subindex. In its latest half-year report to the ASX in February, the company said its underlying net profit after tax from continuing operations more than doubled in the last six months of 2025 to \$4.1 million, “underpinned by new contract awards and extensions with tier 1 clients, Anglo American, Yancoal and Glencore.”

Two former bosses at the Crinum mine are due to face another court this month on two counts each of failure to discharge a health and safety obligation causing death or grievous bodily harm under the Queensland Coal Mining Safety and Health Act 1999. These crimes carry maximum penalties of just \$250,000 or two years’ imprisonment.

Dawson’s daughters Katrina Edwards and Leesh Dawson delivered victim impact statements to the court, describing him as a beloved “Poppy” and close father, whose life had been cut short painfully.

Speaking outside the court, Ms Dawson said no amount of money would bring her father back and the most important thing “was best practice is always followed and no more miners die.” She said: “This was entirely preventable; there were numerous reports and evidence to show that.”

Despite the small fine levied on Mastermyne, the Mining and Energy Union (MEU), the main mining industry trade union, hailed the sentence, with the MEU general vice president Stephen Smyth describing it as a milestone for justice and accountability.

“This conviction sends a powerful message to the industry that negligence resulting in the death of a worker will not go unpunished,” he said. Smyth also welcomed the charges against the two executives, saying: “Workplace incidents leave a lifelong impact on affected workers, and it is vital that they are taken seriously by authorities.”

That typifies the role of the union apparatuses. They work closely with employers and the “authorities”—the state and federal governments and their supposed workplace safety regulators—to deflect the anger of workers and their families into safe official

channels.

Even where trade unions have members on sites, they help cover over the real cause of dangerous working conditions—the subordination of workers’ health and lives to the ruthless interests of corporate profit, notably through speed-ups, subcontracting and casualisation.

Together with Labor governments, the unions have particularly promoted industrial manslaughter laws, which began appearing in 2017, as answers to the rising toll of workplace deaths and injuries.

But no improvement has occurred despite industrial manslaughter becoming a criminal offence in every Australian state and territory as of late 2024. These laws are meant to punish “gross negligence” or “reckless conduct” by employers that leads to a worker’s death.

There have been only six successful industrial manslaughter convictions across Australia, despite hundreds of workplace deaths being reported each year. Data from Safe Work Australia indicates that by May 7, 43 workers had died nationally in 2026, following 180 deaths in 2025. These figures understate the true toll because chronic occupational illnesses and unreported incidents are often excluded from official counts.

## A mounting toll

Workers in Queensland have experienced terrible workplace fatalities in recent months, including four in April:

- On April 6, Miikael “Mikey” Varuhin, 32, a Finnish construction worker, fell about four metres through scaffolding at a development site in Clayfield, an inner northern suburb of Brisbane, suffering a catastrophic brain injury.

On April 17, Chris Kelly died after he was crushed between two trucks at a workplace in Brisbane’s east, the All Star Infrastructure site on Wynnum Road in Tingalpa.

On April 20, about 15 kilometres away, a worker was critically injured in a workplace accident involving a forklift at Karreman Quarries on West Mount Cotton Road in Sheldon.

On April 28, a 36-year-old worker was crushed while employees were moving large crates filled with stock at a workplace in Wellcamp, near Toowoomba, a regional city about 130 kilometres west of Brisbane.

According to the Safe Work Australia figures, Queensland frequently records the highest or second-highest number of worker fatalities in Australia. In 2024, Queensland had the most deaths (53), followed by New South Wales (48).

In all these cases, the state safety agency, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ), said it would investigate the circumstances with assistance from police. Such investigations typically take many months or years and invariably end up in whitewashes or, at best, paltry fines on the employer.

Repeatedly, family members and workers have raised concerns about the reported lack of safety precautions and demanded action to halt the deaths and injuries caused by corporate profit-driven speed-ups and disregard for workers’ lives.

But the contempt for workers’ lives continues. Last year’s deaths in New South Wales of a young worker at the Port Kembla steelworks and of two mineworkers in the Cobar tragedy are typical. Work continued or quickly resumed after the deaths. The managements imposed gag orders on workers and investigations were left in the hands of official agencies, ensuring no meaningful accountability.

Globally, the International Labour Organisation estimates that 2.93 million workers die annually from work-related causes. In March, in one of the most recent known tragedies, a disastrous blaze at an auto parts factory in Daejeon, South Korea killed 14 workers and injured 60 others, at least 25 seriously.

Even by official counts, the record is damning. The US Department of Labor’s latest annual report on worker deaths found 5,070 preventable workplace fatalities in 2024, a figure that dramatically undercounts the toll when occupational illness is included.

Last month marked one year since 63-year-old Ronald Adams Sr. was killed at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan. His widow, Shamenia Stewart-Adams, and co-workers have still received no official explanation of what happened. The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration has issued no findings, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) has said nothing.

These deaths and injuries are not just “accidents.” They are the inevitable product of a capitalist system that subordinates health and safety to the relentless drive for profit.

The basic social rights of the working class, such as workplace safety, can be defended and advanced only through the independent mobilisation of the working class in opposition to the parties of the ruling class, including Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, and their servants in the trade union bureaucracy. Over the past year, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has taken the initiative in defence of workers’ safety by conducting independent investigations into the deaths of Ronald Adams Sr. and other workers.

Around the world, rank-and-file committees must be built in opposition to trade union collaboration with management in the fight to assert workers’ control over safety and production. Under the democratic control of workers, these committees could assess site conditions, investigate deaths and injuries, formulate demands and enforce safety measures, including through industrial action.

Above all, the fight for health and safety is bound up with ending a global social system based on the exploitation of workers’ labour power for private profit. This requires the forging of a socialist and internationalist leadership in the working class to unite the full power of workers across national borders, to take control of basic industries as part of the socialist reorganisation of the world economy to protect workers’ lives and meet human need, not corporate profit.



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