

Australia: BHP hires strikebreakers as mining workers vote for industrial action

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Hundreds of workers at BHP's Port Hedland iron ore export hub have voted to strike, in what would be the first protected industrial action at the mining giant's port operations in Western Australia's (WA) Pilbara region in more than three decades. The company has responded by preparing a strikebreaking operation.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) announced last week that 100 percent of its approximately 100 members at the port had backed a protected action ballot authorising work stoppages of between 30 minutes and 24 hours. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) reported that 89 percent of its more than 100 members had voted in favour.

The strike votes are part of bargaining for a new enterprise agreement covering about 450 BHP employees at the port, with the Australian Workers Union (AWU) yet to file a ballot application to allow the workers it covers to take industrial action.

The workers, who are currently employed under individual contracts, are seeking a common enterprise agreement to introduce pay parity for workers with similar skills and experience, a clear classification and progression structure and improved working conditions.

Despite the overwhelming vote in favour of industrial action, the ETU and AMWU bureaucracies have not yet called a strike, which requires giving BHP at least five days' notice, but BHP is already making plans to undermine it.

The company claims that strike action shutting down the world's largest iron ore loading port would potentially mean \$126 million a day in lost revenue. But BHP Australia president Geraldine Slattery said the company had "contingencies in place should disruption arise that would get to that scale."

Within hours of the ballot results, it emerged that labour hire firms have been actively recruiting strikebreakers. A text message reportedly seen by Australian Associated Press offered positions for electricians at Port Hedland paying up to \$93 an hour.

The unions responded to BHP's scab labour initiative by pleading for more backroom talks. AMWU WA branch secretary Steve McCartney called on the company to "start negotiating seriously."

ETU WA branch secretary Adam Woodage complained, "It

is concerning and disappointing to see the biggest company in Australia using Amazon-style tactics to stonewall in negotiations and signalling in the media that they would rather bring in strikebreakers than negotiate a fair agreement."

The reference to "Amazon-style tactics" is an attempt to portray BHP's methods in this dispute as an aberration, mistakenly imported from the US and not in keeping with what workers should expect from an "Australian" business.

Further elaborating this nationalist line, Woodage said, "This company is not the corporate citizen it used to be."

The purpose is both to promote the false conception that workers can advance their demands through moral appeals to the company to change its ways, and to isolate the Port Hedland workers from the tens of thousands of other BHP staff across the country. Contrary to the bureaucrats' claims, the company, along with the other mining corporations, is waging an offensive against the jobs, pay and conditions of its workers across the country.

Late last year, BHP Mitsubishi Alliance slashed more than 800 coal industry jobs in Queensland. Even within the Pilbara, the unions are cutting the Port Hedland workers off from the high-voltage power workers already taking industrial action across BHP's Pilbara operations and the 1,600 workers at BHP's Mining Area C and South Flank operations, who are being pressured to accept a four-year deal with 4 percent annual pay increases—a real wage cut under conditions of inflation.

Meanwhile, the company reported \$6.2 billion in profits for the six months to December 2025, more than 20 percent higher than the same period a year earlier. The company's share price on the Australian Stock Exchange hit a record high of A\$65.78 yesterday, a 75 percent increase over the past 12 months.

The unions are covering up this reality, of a massive multinational corporation making vast profits while slashing jobs, wages and conditions, because their role is not to defend workers' interests but those of corporations. As such, the bureaucracy is determined to prevent a broader struggle that would seriously disrupt the company's operations and profits.

This orientation is underscored by Woodage's statement that "We want a company that is strong, that is capable, that can sit down and make agreements. But the actions we have seen from BHP recently show a company that is divided, tone-deaf and

unable or unwilling to act in its own best interest.”

These comments can only be understood as a promise from the union bureaucracy to the company: Give us a seat at the negotiating table and we will ensure that workers deliver the super profits you demand.

At the centre of the Port Hedland dispute is an attempt by the unions, backed by the state and federal Labor governments, to reestablish themselves in the Pilbara as an industrial police force.

For decades, BHP and other mining corporations in the region have employed workers on individual agreements, meaning wages and conditions could be wildly disparate between workers doing similar jobs. Under Australia’s draconian industrial relations laws, this arrangement has meant workers had no right to strike.

This situation was created through the collaboration of the union apparatus. When BHP moved to introduce individual contracts at its Pilbara iron ore sites in 1999–2000, in order to introduce around-the-clock product and the greater use of contract labour, the ACTU shut down nationwide strikes at BHP facilities, despite massive opposition from workers, and under conditions where picketing workers in Port Hedland were being attacked by police.

Instead, the union bureaucrats unsuccessfully sought to maintain their own privileged position at the bargaining table by convincing the company that working with the unions was the best way to achieve its aims, vowing that they were committed “to bring about world’s best practice that would substantially lower costs in the Pilbara operations.”

This was rooted in a broader process that began in the 1980s with the Accords struck between the Hawke Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). The union bureaucracy systematically collaborated with corporations and the Labor government to drive down wages, slash working conditions and eliminate jobs throughout the working class.

The move now to restore the unions in the Pilbara has nothing to do with improving wages and conditions for workers. What underlies it is a disagreement between different factions of the ruling class over how best to enforce the deepening assault on working-class wages and conditions.

In late 2022, the federal Labor government introduced changes to the so-called Fair Work Act aimed at empowering the unions to broaden the coverage of workers under enterprise bargaining agreements. After years of declining membership, the aim was to increase the capacity of the unions to carry out their decades-long role as the chief organs of class suppression over wider sections of the working class.

Federal Resources Minister Madeleine King has made a show of siding with the Port Hedland workers, declaring on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio that “no one likes industrial action, we know it’s disruptive, but sometimes because of the imbalance of power between workers and their

employer—the biggest miner in the world—they need to work together.”

Her argument is not that BHP workers should fight to break the stranglehold of a corporation that extracts enormous profits from Australia’s mineral wealth while suppressing wages and conditions. It is that BHP should accept the unions as the most effective mechanism for managing the workforce and ensuring stable operations.

The fact is that the federal Labor government is overseeing a massive assault on the wages and conditions of the working class, strikingly expressed in the \$63.8 billion over four years in cuts to social spending contained in last month’s budget.

The overwhelming strike vote at Port Hedland expresses the determination of workers to fight for improved wages and conditions. But such a struggle cannot be left under the control of the union bureaucracy, which will seek to contain and isolate this dispute, using the threat of strike action as leverage to extract a deal that re-establishes the unions’ negotiating position, while leaving the fundamental power of BHP over its workforce intact.

Workers at Port Hedland and across BHP’s Pilbara operations must take the conduct of this dispute into their own hands. They must establish independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, not bureaucrats. These committees must reach out to workers across BHP’s operations, the mining industry and the broader working class, who all confront similar attacks on their wages and conditions.

What is required is not just an industrial struggle against BHP and the other mining corporations, but a political fight against the Labor government and the capitalist profit system itself.



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