Australia: BHP iron ore strike in Pilbara—first in decades

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Last Thursday, workers at BHP's Port Hedland export facility in Western Australia (WA) stopped work for eight hours. It was the first strike by workers in the iron-rich Pilbara region in more than 25 years.

Since the start of June, around 250 workers covered by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) have voted in industrial action ballots, overwhelmingly to strike.

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. Such an agreement would cover around 450 of the approximately 1,200 workers employed at BHP's Port Hedland port and rail facilities.

Reports of exactly how many workers walked off the job on Thursday range from almost 200 to just 63, with the company and the corporate media anxious to downplay the industrial action as an ineffectual fiasco.

What is clear, however, is that the union bureaucracies never intended for the stoppage to cause meaningful disruption to BHP's Port Hedland operations, which the company claims generate more than $120 million a day in revenue.

At Thursday's strike, which was timed to coincide with the end of one shift and the beginning of another, no attempt was made to prevent contractors, labour-hire workers or other non-striking workers from entering the facility.

Instead, the unions organised a "family-friendly BBQ" outside the gates, complete with face-painting, bearing more resemblance to a school fete than an industrial struggle.

While the carnival proceeded outside the facility, it was virtually business as usual inside, with all seven ships at port being loaded and one ship sailing as scheduled, according to BHP. Having made no attempt to halt production, the unions did not dispute this, but claimed that the strike delayed maintenance on a ship loader and a car dumper that had broken down.

Despite acknowledging that BHP had "probably not" taken "a financial hit," ETU WA Secretary Adam Woodage declared, "We consider it to be a successful strike action because we had community involvement and the community enjoyed having us there," the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) reported.

The unions have not called any further strike action, and will join the company in bargaining meetings involving the pro-business Fair Work Commission tomorrow.

While he flagged the possibility of future strikes, depending on the outcome of these talks, Woodage emphasised that these too will not involve a so-called "hard picket." This is of particular significance in this dispute, because BHP has been recruiting strike breakers as a "contingency" to undermine industrial action.

Woodage effectively endorsed this, saying, "BHP is allowed to recruit an alternative workforce," the *Australian* reported.

The ETU leader's comments, along with the toothless "community picket" on Thursday, show that the unions have given BHP carte blanche to bring in scabs to defeat any further industrial action, with the confidence that the bureaucracy will prevent workers from blocking the strikebreakers.

This should be a massive red flag for BHP workers. They have voted overwhelmingly for a historic struggle against the mining giant, but the bureaucracies that claim to represent them are busy working to sell them out.

In a further effort to carry out the betrayal of the Port Hedland workers, the unions are seeking to isolate the dispute, which is taking place amid an upsurge of industrial struggles in the Pilbara and more broadly.

Most notably, the unions' delay in calling strike action until after backroom negotiations with BHP on July 7 allowed the company to push through a real-wage cutting enterprise agreement at its Mining Area C and South Flank operations, also in the Pilbara, by the narrowest of margins—just 938 of 1,814 workers voted in favour.

While the bureaucrats made a show of denouncing this "non-union agreement," the company was only able to push it through after months of backroom negotiation because the unions presented workers with no alternative way forward. Despite overwhelming strike votes, little significant industrial action was ever called, and such stoppages as did take place were swiftly shut down in response to company threats to dock wages.

Only after the possibility of legally protected simultaneous action across the two sections of BHP workers was off the table, did the unions call the strike at Port Hedland.

To cover over this cynical manoeuvre with a veneer of "solidarity," the ETU held protests outside BHP offices in Brisbane and Melbourne on Thursday to coincide with the Pilbara stoppage. But these were nothing more than stunts—not a single BHP worker outside of Port Hedland downed tools and the company's vast profits were not impacted in any way.

Even before Thursday's strike, there were warnings that the unions were preparing a betrayal. Woodage said last month, "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."

This was a promise: Give us a seat at the negotiating table and we will ensure that workers deliver the super profits you demand. It underscored that what is at the centre of the Port Hedland dispute is not the wages and conditions of workers, but an attempt by the unions, backed by the state and federal Labor governments, to reestablish themselves in the Pilbara as an industrial police force.

This takes place when, after decades in which, under conditions of booming exports, the major mining corporations were able to placate workers, without recourse to the union bureaucracy, with crumbs from their vast profits to prevent the eruption of struggles.

Now, amid conditions of soaring inflation and an upsurge of the class struggle worldwide, there is a disagreement between sections of the ruling class over whether the unions are needed as the mechanism for managing the workforce and ensuring stable operations.

Port Hedland workers cannot afford to leave this struggle in the control of the union bureaucracy, which will seek to contain and isolate it. The threat of limited strike action is being used as leverage to extract a deal that re-establishes the unions' negotiating position in return for suppressing any opposition from the workforce.

Workers at Port Hedland and across BHP's operations throughout the Pilbara and more broadly should take the conduct of this dispute into their own hands. To do this, they must establish independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers, not bureaucrats. These committees must reach out to workers across BHP, 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 on the basis of a socialist program.