

Mass arrests at Australian mine

Union rules out national strike

By our correspondent
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Arrests are continuing on the picket line at the Gordonstone coal mine near Emerald, in central Queensland. Sixty more workers were detained on Tuesday bringing the total arrested to over 146 in two weeks.

Earlier this month police bussed in 65 reinforcements from police stations in the surrounding towns of Gladstone, Longreach and Mackay to force a busload of scabs through a 250-strong picket. After a three-hour battle the police arrested 22 miners.

Following the first arrests there were rumours of national strike action but these have since been dismissed by the national leadership of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, now headed by the former mining union president John Maitland.

The bitter dispute at Gordonstone erupted 17 months ago when the mine's former owner, ARCO, sacked its entire 300-strong workforce and attempted to reopen the mine with new non-union labour and under reduced working conditions.

Armed security guards were hired to harass the sacked workers. Miners and their families were constantly followed and their homes put under surveillance.

Despite the level of intimidation, which caused anger in mining communities around the country, the union did not organise any coordinated campaign to defend the Gordonstone miners. Instead an unfair dismissals case was launched in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), which eventually granted a payout to the sacked workers but refused to order reinstatement.

Since then the mine has been bought by the British-Australian giant Rio Tinto, which has attempted to restart operations with 150 non-union workers.

Using a \$2 shelf company, Rio Tinto first hired 22 workers to vote on a new work agreement, which was then ratified by the IRC.

The mining union officials make a virtue out of the length of time Gordonstone workers have picketed the mine. In November last year they even erected a monument to proclaim it as the longest picket in the history of the black coal industry.

Gordonstone is just one of a number of disputes over the past two years that have been dragged out by the union leadership, from the 12 month-long picket at the Vickery mine in northern NSW, to the drawn-out conflicts at the Rio Tinto mines in the NSW Hunter Valley.

The record shows there is little to celebrate. Despite the determination of the workers, all these disputes ended in defeat. The disputes were isolated, the workers were eventually worn down and demoralised, and a return to work was organised by the union on the employer's terms.

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