

Australia: Sacked Oakdale miners work without pay to recover entitlements

By Terry Cook
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About 150 coal miners from the Oakdale colliery, near Sydney, Australia, are spending over \$5,000 a day and working without pay in an attempt to recoup some of the \$6.3 million in entitlements and redundancy money owed to them when the mine closed at the beginning of last month.

The miners are paying for fuel, electricity and security at the mine while they work to salvage machinery and equipment so that it can be sold at auction in three weeks time. The \$5,000 needed each day to finance the operation is being taken from a fund set up from the sale of coal extracted by the miners after the closure—also without pay.

Union delegates at the pit said the miners had been working under extremely difficult conditions to save the machinery because the management had turned off all the power in the mine to save money. The moisture extraction fans had been closed down and water had got into much of the equipment. Heaters had to be run constantly for two days to dry the pit out. Despite the miners' efforts, the machinery will be sold off at bargain basement prices—fetching only a fraction of its value. The men will receive only a tiny proportion of what they are owed.

Even though the recovery operation is being financed by the miners, union delegates admit that other creditors with secured loans (some 230 creditors are owed \$41.5 million) could easily claim the proceeds of the machinery sale. Oakdale union president Roy Lamoon told the media: "We are financing this recovery and it's not cheap. But we have to be a bit careful. If we overdo it then someone else will come in and take the money."

The sacked miners have been reduced to the latest desperate measures by the union. Despite a public outpouring of "outrage" by its leaders and demands that

the government legislates to protect workers' entitlements, the union has no intention of waging an industrial and political campaign to defend the sacked workers.

Even though there is widespread sympathy for the workers, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union organised only 400 people to attend its demonstration in Canberra on June 27. Union members in mining, construction and in the power industry all continued to work. Production has continued at the Brimstone and Metropolitan mines, the five coal washers and the haulage company belonging to Oakbridge's owner Max Dunbier. A recent report shows that Oakbridge returned a \$3 million profit for the six months to June 1998 for Dunbier and the company's investors.

Federal Opposition Leader Kim Beazley and New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, both members of the Labor Party, have utilised the situation to make political capital while doing nothing to fight the closure and sackings. Carr has pledged to make public money from the government's secured loan to Oakbridge available to the miners. But even if this happened, the money will go nowhere near compensating the sacked workers for what they have lost. Beazley promised that the first act of a future Labor government would be to introduce legislation to protect the rights of sacked workers, even though the Labor Party failed to take any such measure when it held office for 13 years.

What is facing the Oakdale miners is becoming more common as bankrupt companies pay their secured creditors, investors and others before handing over any entitlements to their workforce. A recent survey shows that over 3,000 workers employed by dozens of companies lost an estimated \$30 million in entitlements over the past three years alone.

These include workers sacked from the Cobar copper mine, the Woodlawn coalmine, the Grafton meat processing and packing plant, Bells and Jardine Pacific (which owned the Sizzlers restaurant franchise in the country's southern states), Austral Pacific Buses, Rockhampton Nursing Homes, Mt Schank Abattoirs, Cut Make and Trim, and Mighty Foods. In 1996, the telecommunications group Exicom closed its Sydney operations, owing 1,000 sacked workers over \$17 million in entitlements.

The case of the small NSW-based GD Engineering is typical. The company closed its doors in April last year with almost \$50,000 in entitlements outstanding to three metal workers. The appointed administrator sold the company's assets for \$60,000 and pocketed half as a fee. The sacked workers eventually received only one tenth of what they were owed.

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