

Australia: Coal companies provoke new miners' walkouts in Queensland

By Richard Phillips
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About 3,500 workers at seven BHP-Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) coal mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin walked off the job on March 27, after a breakdown in long-running union negotiations over a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The conflict is highly strategic: BMA miners produce over 58 million tonnes of coking coal per year, or about a fifth of annual global production.

The strike action, which ends today, involves members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union. It follows a seven-day walkout in mid-February and industrial action during 2011.

While the unions plan to hold stopwork meetings next week, their principal concern is keeping the lid on miners' growing anger over the escalating company attacks on working conditions. Any future action proposed by the unions will be in order to dissipate their members' frustrations while seeking further talks with the BMA behind closed doors to deliver the corporation's productivity demands.

CFMEU district president Stephen Smyth told the media on Tuesday: "We went to the negotiating table with the aim of discussing with the company how to end this dispute." This has been unions' *modus operandi*, not just since it began its enterprise negotiations with BMA in 2010, but during the past three decades, endorsing the expanded use of contract and part-time labour, extended shifts and other deals that destroyed hard-won working conditions and safety standards.

Last year BHP-Billiton, the largest mining corporation in the world, posted a \$23 billion profit, much of it from coal and iron ore exports to China. The company has offered Bowen Basin miners annual pay

rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker—far less than the inflated cost of living in mining communities. These increases are tied to various trade-offs to boost productivity. And these demands for concessions have been stepped up as the negotiations have dragged on.

BMA, which claims that its "right to manage" is being threatened, has rejected claims for three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, equal pay for labour-hire employees, protections for permanent workers displaced by contractors, increased superannuation and improved housing.

Late last year, BMA insisted that it, not the unions, appoint health and safety officers, and on Monday it demanded the right to modify work rosters at any time. This new claim reversed a previous "in-principle" deal with the union, which required that any shift or roster changes to be trialled first, and only introduced if endorsed by a majority of employees.

BMA's latest demand is a clear provocation designed to create the conditions for a lockout of thousands of miners and to force the dispute into the Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal, where all further industrial action could be deemed illegal.

A recent email from BHP-Billiton's coal and iron chief executive Marcus Randolph to local mine managers makes clear that the giant corporation is determined to inflict a major assault on miners' hard-won jobs and working conditions.

The email, which was leaked to the media, states: "These issues are not negotiable—not now, not next month and not next year. I know all of you would like to 'just get on with it and get our operations back to normal.' Unfortunately, this is not something we are able to do." Randolph insisted that "this is the fight we

had to have” and the “battle is likely to get tougher before it’s over.” Last month, BHP-Billiton threatened to shut one of its older open cut mines if miners continued industrial action.

With about a third of current mining industry agreements about to expire or in early stages of negotiations, BMA is fully supported by other key mining corporations operating in Australia, which are determined to establish a new industrial benchmark. BHP-Billiton and other mining giants have also demanded that the Labor government’s already highly restrictive anti-strike laws be amended to ban industrial action if enterprise negotiations are not settled within certain periods. The mining companies further want the reintroduction of statutory individual agreements, and for FWA to not automatically accept unions as employees’ enterprise bargaining agents.

The unions have responded to BMA’s escalated demands with feigned shock. Smyth, the CFMEU district president, told the media he was “appalled” by BMA which, he said, was attempting to force miners into “family-unfriendly rosters.” Other union officials declared that the company was on a “war footing” and that its “level of contempt” for its workforce was “truly astonishing.”

These statements are disingenuous, to say the least. The unions have isolated the BMA Bowen Basin miners from their fellow workers throughout Australia, and confined them within Labor’s Fair Work laws while dragging out negotiations for almost 16 months. If BMA forces the dispute into FWA, the mining unions, like the airline and other unions, will declare their “outrage,” only to fall into line and police whatever deal is imposed.

BMA miners are at a turning point. If they remain under the domination of the mining unions, they will be defeated. In order to challenge the company’s attacks and the back-room union manoeuvres, miners need to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, and turn to other Bowen Basin workers and miners throughout Australia. The defence of jobs, conditions and living standards can go forward only as part of a unified struggle based on a socialist program against the mining corporations, FWA and the Gillard government itself.

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