

Australia: Casual coal miners begin week long strike in Wollongong

By Oscar Grenfell
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Around one hundred coal miners at the Wongawilli mine near Wollongong, an industrial city south of Sydney, began seven-day strike action this morning. The workers are employed as casuals by CAS Mining, on behalf of Wollongong Coal. They are demanding a new enterprise agreement (EA) that guarantees job permanency and improved wages.

The industrial action expresses growing anger among workers over wage levels, and opposition to a stepped-up offensive against conditions, amid a soaring cost of living.

In a sign of nervousness within the ruling elite that the strike could become a focal point for broader discontent, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper prominently reported it on Friday. Kelly O'Dwyer, the federal Liberal-National Coalition government's industrial relations minister, called for talks to prevent the stoppage.

The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), however, called the action as part of a cynical attempt to present the unions, which have collaborated in the destruction of full-time jobs for decades, as opponents of growing casualisation. The unions are also seeking to exploit the strike for their campaign to channel workers behind the election of yet another big business federal Labor government.

The fraudulent character of the union posturing is underscored by its record at Wongawilli. The CFMMEU has enforced all of management's dictates and prevented any unified struggle by mine workers against a series of attacks on conditions.

In 2015, Wollongong Coal shuttered the Wongawilli site, laying off around 80 permanent workers. The company invoked substantial financial losses to justify the move, amid the downturn in global commodity prices after the 2008 global financial crisis. The shutdown followed a series of sackings at the site and Wollongong Coal's nearby Russell Vale mine.

Wollongong Coal is a subsidiary of Jindal Group, a diversified resources and manufacturing conglomerate headquartered in India. It has an annual turnover of around \$18 billion.

The union did nothing to prevent the shut-down. It ensured continued production at Wollongong Steel's other mines in the region. It only issued plaintive appeals that if the mine were reopened, it be staffed by the workers who had been laid-off.

In 2016 the company reopened the Wongawilli mine to take advantage of the doubling of commodity prices amid a global rebound in the sector. In order to slash costs, it hired a contract workforce, with fewer rights and entitlements than the previous workforce, and no job permanency.

Last year, Wollongong Coal outsourced its staffing arrangements at Wongawilli to CAS Mining, a labour hire company. Workers at the site have been employed as casuals, with no sick or leave entitlements, or other benefits of full-time employment. They have been paid hundreds of dollars less per week than workers at other mines in the area.

According to CAS Mining, the workers are paid \$34 an hour, compared to a rate of \$42 for permanent employees at nearby mines. Workers have claimed that if they take "too many" sick days, for which they are not paid, they no longer receive shifts. The site is an underground mine, involving physically demanding labour.

The arrangement, which the unions have done nothing to prevent, is potentially illegal. Under Fair Work industrial legislation, companies can only use casual labour if provisions are contained in an enterprise agreement. CAS Mining's casuals, however, are not employed under an agreement.

Since late last year, CAS Mining has been seeking to force the workers onto a new EA, which would classify them as contractors. The workers would not receive a

wage rise and would lose casual pay loading. They would only be guaranteed 12 months' employment.

The CFMMEU has responded by calling for a meagre 10 percent pay increase. CAS Mining, however, has declared that it has not been provided with sufficient funds by Wollongong Coal to mandate any pay rise.

The regressive enterprise agreement at Wongawilli is part of Wollongong Coal's attempts to slash costs and boost market share, amid on-going losses. The company reported losses of \$73 million for the 2018 financial year and \$57 million in the half-year to September 2018. It has pledged to its shareholders that it will expand production at its Russell Vale mine in 2019, where the company has previously slashed dozens of jobs over the past three years.

The offensive is bound up with escalating competition in the resources sector. Across the country, unions have imposed real pay cuts and attacks on conditions while doing everything they can to suppress growing opposition among miners.

In October 2018, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) ended a 53-day strike action by some 1,500 workers at three aluminium mines and two bauxite refineries owned by Alcoa in Western Australia. The AWU touted worthless promises by the company to "address job security."

The company has pressed ahead with its demands for a new EA that will enable it "to respond to changing market and operating conditions," i.e., to reduce shift times and lay-off workers when demand is low.

In February 2018, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union similarly pushed through an enterprise agreement at Griffin Coal in Queensland, mandating wage cuts of between 18 and 20 percent. The sell-out deal followed the union's suppression of a 180-day strike by workers at the site after the management attempted to impose a wage reduction of 43 percent.

The record underscores the fraudulent character of union claims to be waging a struggle in defence of mine workers' jobs and conditions.

The CFMMEU is also seeking to bolster the Labor Party's claims that if it forms federal government, it will crackdown on the "dodgy practices" of labour hire operators. The union's national president, Tony Maher told the *Australian* that it would seek to ensure that labour hire was an election issue.

Labor has outlined virtually no concrete proposals, and has guaranteed ahead of time that any regulatory changes would be accompanied by an amnesty of up to 18 months.

Labor has repeatedly signalled to the corporate and financial elite that a government it headed would be "fiscally responsible," i.e., would seek to make the working class pay for the deepening crisis of Australian capitalism.

The massive growth of casual and contract labour is above all the result of the policies of Labor and the unions. In the 1980s, the unions signed a series of accords with the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating providing for the deregulation of the economy, and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs, including in mining, steel and car-manufacturing.

The consequence has been a surge in precarious labour, which now accounts for between 40 and 50 percent of all jobs, and a social crisis in former industrial centres such as Wollongong.

The primary concern of the unions is to prevent the development of a broader movement of the working class against growing casual and contract work and poverty-level wages. The unions are also fearful that the operations of labour hire contractors threaten their own position at the negotiating table, where they bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of workers they falsely claim to represent while ensuring the privileges of the union officialdom.

Workers at Wongawilli can only take their struggle forward through a complete break with the unions and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank and file committees.

These would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the unions and coordinating joint political and industrial action with workers throughout the Wollongong-Illawarra region, along with miners across the country and internationally.

Above all, what is required is a new, socialist perspective, aimed at establishing a workers' government that would place mining, and other major industries, along with the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

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