

Australia: Six Queensland mining deaths in 12 months

By Patrick Davies
30 July 2019

The tragic death earlier this month of Jack Gerdes, a 27-year-old contractor, was the sixth mining industry fatality in the Australian state of Queensland during the past 12 months. The number of mining-related deaths is the highest in the state since 1997.

Gerdes was crushed to death at the Baralaba North Coal mine in the Bowen Basin region on July 7. He had been employed at the mine through labour contractor Golding since December 2018. Gerdes was trapped between the body of an excavator and the safety rails of a flight of stairs, sustaining catastrophic injuries to his head, face and limbs.

The details of the incident are still under investigation. The mine was reopened just three days after the incident, with only the scene of the accident being sealed off.

In another incident on the same day, a 57-year-old worker fell 10 metres from a platform at a washery at Glencore's Collinsville Coal mine, suffering back and pelvic injuries.

The accidents are part of a growing trend of dangerous and fatal incidents in Queensland mines.

Last month, a Mackay man David Routledge died when a wall collapsed while he was operating a digger at the Middlemount open-cut coal mine, northwest of Rockhampton. Paramedics said the mining wall collapsed onto a machine and entrapped Routledge, who was operating it. Rescuers were unable to get to him for hours. There have also been fatalities at Saraji Mine and Moranbah North Mine.

David Cliff, a former health and safety advisor to the Queensland mining council, told Associated Press that "one or two" serious accidents "may be an aberration," but six fatal incidents was not. The current conditions "fly in the face of modern standards," he said.

Cliff alluded to the immense pressures on casual and

contract workers. "We need to get a really good reporting culture with no fear of blame" he said. "If someone does something wrong, we don't want them not reporting it because they're afraid to lose their job."

The Queensland state Labor government responded by calling an "emergency meeting" of a mining advisory committee, which had not been sitting for months.

State government commissioners, mining company CEOs and union officials in attendance attempted to cover up their responsibility for the growing crisis. Their aim is to contain the widespread anger among workers and their families.

Queensland Mines Minister Anthony Lynham told the media after the meeting that there was "no blame" for the latest fatality, even before it had been investigated. The gathering did not propose any concrete measures to resolve the safety crisis.

Instead, two reviews have been established. One will examine the state's mining health and safety legislation. The other, to be conducted by a forensic structural engineer Dr Sean Brady, will review all fatal incidents in Queensland mines and quarries since 2000.

In a clear warning sign of a whitewash, the reviews gained support from all "industry representatives" present, including mining CEOs and union officials. They will not be completed until later in the year, so they also will do nothing to resolve the immediate dangers confronting miners.

The Labor Government also appointed three additional mines inspectors and restructured the role of chief inspector. Lynham vaguely indicated that industrial manslaughter legislation was a possibility, but committed his government to nothing.

Australian Workers Union (AWU) official Mark

Raguse welcomed the outcome of the government-organised meeting. Interviewed on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, he lent credence to the mealy-mouthed statements of government ministers and mining industry representatives. “They seem to be saying the right things,” he said.

The AWU and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) promoted a “safety reset” to be held in August. This will involve the unions, the companies and government officials lecturing workers about the importance of health and safety, and providing them with documents on best work practices. The clear implication is that the accidents are a result of the lack of care shown by workers.

The CFMMEU said this would be about “empowering all workers to stand up, speak out and go home, no matter what their employment status.”

In reality, the responsibility lies with the government, the employers and the unions themselves, which have enforced the destruction of safety and other basic conditions for decades.

The Labor government’s indifference to the safety of miners was demonstrated by Lynham’s admission that the mining advisory committee was dissolved in late 2018, supposedly because it was unable to meet a gender quota. Before it was effectively abolished, the committee was a toothless body that did nothing to stop a spate of deaths and serious injuries.

Union officials have sought to evade their responsibility. CFMMEU district president Stephen Smyth told the *Guardian*: “The lack of experience, the lack of supervision, the push for production, the influx of labour hire. They’re the real issues.”

Smyth noted that up to 60 percent of employees in major mining operations are contractors. He said many workers were fearful of objecting to unsafe working practices, for fear that they would be sacked.

But this is a damning indictment of the unions themselves. The CFMMEU, the AWU and other unions in the industry have played the central role in the destruction of permanent mining jobs and an unending assault on working conditions. Unions have helped create the conditions that have led to deaths, and ensured uninterrupted production at all costs.

From July 2017, workers at Glencore’s Oakey North

Coal mine were locked out for 230 days because they refused to accept a new enterprise agreement that would have expanded casualisation at the site.

The CFMMEU isolated the locked-out workers and enforced the Fair Work Commission’s anti-strike provisions, preventing any broader mobilisation of support for them. The union ultimately pushed through a sell-out deal that accepted the company’s key demands.

In 2015, Glencore, with the tacit support of the union, cut 180 jobs at Collinsville mine, the site of one of the latest incidents, as part of a broader cost-cutting offensive.

Last October, Glencore eliminated 400 jobs from the Hail Creek mine it acquired in August, in the Bowen Basin. The restructure reduced the workforce by 30 percent in an effort to ensure “financial stability.”

When there is an increase in demand and expanded production, the company hires casual and contract workers to perform the labour that would previously have been carried out by full-time employees.

The record demonstrates that the unions operate as an arm of company management, responsible for the conditions that have led to the tragic deaths and injuries in the mining industry. A movement demanding the highest safety standards, and permanent, full-time jobs throughout the mines will only be built through a rebellion against these corporatised, pro-business entities.

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