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Strike action delivers 'Rolls-Royce' EA

MEU members at a drilling contractor in the Illawarra have secured one of the best enterprise agreements in the region through boosting union density and taking strike action.

Members at CH4 Drilling have voted up a substantially improved agreement including a 4% per annum pay rise for the next three years - double the company's previous 'best' offer. The new EA also includes set-rate bonuses, and most forms of leave paid as at work, and backpay to the outset of bargaining in January.

CH4 drilling is contracted to South32's Appin and Dendrobium mines. Members at these sites have been bargaining for a new EA since January. In the months of negotiations, the company moved little on their original offer: a measly 1% per annum increase, which later went up to 2%.

To the workers at CH4, this was not good enough. Given the sector's record profits, pay rises won by permanent South 32 mine workers, and cost-of-living pressures – they were determined to get a better deal.

At the outset of bargaining, union membership at CH4 sat at around 50%. However, over the number

has steadily grown and now sits at around 95%.

"We got organised," says South West District Vice President Bob Timbs. "We kept talking to the guys and recruited more and built confidence."

This confidence led to workers deciding to pursue industrial action, with workers walking off the job in early August.

The single work stoppage resulted in both CH4 and South32 realising that they were now dealing with a united workforce, and the company's previous 'best' offer was quickly and substantially improved.

"The guys finally said 'let's get into it' and we did," says Bob Timbs. "As soon as the company understood our union density they backed down."

"They gave us what we wanted on pay, bonus, leave and improved a range of clauses. The guys at CH4 have now got a Rolls Royce Enterprise Agreement, one of the best in the District."

"Congratulations to our members. When it comes to taking on the boss and getting us a better deal, they've shown how it's done."

Power station workers stand up for their future



Workers at a Queensland power station are hopeful of a breakthrough in their quest for implementation of the state's Energy Workers Charter after a week of industrial action.

MEU members at the Kogan Creek Power Station have been taking industrial action since Thursday 21 September. Kogan Creek is the largest single unit station in Queensland and generates approximately 10% of the state's energy while also supplying power to much of Northern NSW.

Kogan Creek workers are seeking the inclusion of the Queensland Energy Workers Charter in their new enterprise agreement, as well as a dispute procedure relating to any matters the Energy Industry Council will hand down. They are also seeking greater transparency around the contracting of labour hire workers, and an end to caps on redundancy payments.

The plant is operated by the government-owned corporation CS Energy. The company is fiercely resisting the inclusion of the Worker's Charter, despite being one of the original signatories. The Queensland Energy Workers Charter, the first of its kind in Australia, guarantees that the workers at government-owned corporations who are made redundant by the national energy transition will receive ongoing employment and sets the framework for how the Parties will work together to realise the benefits and mitigate the impacts of the energy transformation within the Queensland energy sector. These are critical elements that must be incorporated into any enterprise agreement otherwise it will not be enforceable by law. Government and Shareholding Ministers change and the MEU won't stand by and leave our members vulnerable.

Signed in September 2022, the Charter was a celebrated as a win for workers in Queensland's energy sector. It secured some certainty for their livelihoods and communities in the transition to a low emissions economy. It is especially significant to workers at state-owned power stations like

Kogan Creek, whose 2035 closure date is fast approaching.

CS Energy claimed via press release to be negotiating with the union in good faith, and "made an offer that will provide employees with generous terms and conditions."

As Kogan's closure date approaches, it is now more important than ever that CS Energy don't minimise their responsibility to workers through utilising labour hire contractors, whether to undercut their EAs or to attempt to avoid commitments under the Energy Workers Charter.

"The MEU will not stand by and let the state-owned assets become another victim of precarious employment and contracted out work which is to the detriment of young Queenslanders and regional communities' future," said Queensland District Vice-President Shane Bruncker.

The outcome of the Kogan Creek industrial action is set to have significant implications for the Queensland energy sector, as it is likely to influence the upcoming negotiations for other state-owned power stations like Callide, and Tarong Power Station.

Implementation of the Queensland Energy Workers Charter into enterprise agreements would ensure a degree of certainty and security for workers and their communities ahead of what is expected to be a destabilizing decade.

"The State Government needs to decide if the Queensland Energy Workers' Charter means something, or if it's not worth the paper it's written on," said Shane Bruncker.

Industrial action is currently suspended ahead a meeting with the Queensland Government aiming to resolve the outstanding issues at Kogan Creek and ensure energy workers benefit from commitments made under the Charter.



Brazilian communities take on BHP over Samarco Dam collapse

We support Brazilian communities fighting for justice from BHP following the catastrophic 2015 Samarco Dam collapse.

Leaders of affected communities briefed MEU national officials in Sydney last month about their on-going struggle to be heard and compensated by BHP.

Representatives of affected indigenous tribal groups and Quilombola communities (descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves) talked about the devastation caused when the tailings dam at the BHP-operated Samarco iron ore mine in Brazil ruptured.

They described how the river and land they rely on for water, food and their way of life has been severely contaminated by toxic sludge that has spread for hundreds of kilometres – yet BHP has ignored their pleas for justice and reparations.

They are among 700,000 claimants in a class action

against BHP over the impact of the dam collapse and are in Australia to raise awareness of their plight.

General President Tony Maher called on investors to hold BHP to account as though the disaster had occurred in Australia.

“We see a double standard in investor attitudes. We saw pressure from investors lead to leadership resignations at Rio Tinto over the destruction of indigenous heritage at Jukaan Gorge. Yet BHP has got off lightly over the consequences of its international operations.

“The message from these Brazilian community leaders was very moving and we support their struggle for justice.”

The Brazilian delegation also met with MPs at Parliament, met with super funds and investors and protested outside BHP’s Melbourne headquarters.

Terminal workers act to address wage suppression



MEU members at Wiggins Island Coal Export Terminal (“WICET”) in Gladstone are taking industrial action this week to close a growing gap between their wages and the industry standard.

In a ballot conducted earlier this month, there was 100% support for various forms of protected industrial action such as work stoppages, bans on non-rostered overtime and bans on using various pieces of equipment, systems and tasks.

MEU bargaining representatives have been engaging in extensive negotiations to bring WICET remuneration closer to the industry standards and to keep pace with cost-of-living pressures.

However, following 15 meetings with company representatives over 8 months, the Union believes that not enough progress has been made.

“Workers who operate and maintain fixed and mobile equipment at the Wiggins Island Coal Export Terminal receive pay far behind comparable coal terminals in Queensland.

“WICET Employees receive about 20% less than the coal terminal directly next door in Gladstone with that gap getting greater every year,” said Queensland District Vice-President Jeff Scales.

“When considering the limited growth of WICET employees’ wages over the last four and a half years, our members believe that a 13% pay increase over three years with a sign-on payment, will go some of the way toward addressing what can only be described as wage suppression. What our

members are seeking is more than reasonable.

“Wiggins Island Coal Export Terminal workers have been critical to the massive profits posted by some of largest mining companies that operate in Queensland and globally, yet we see a significant lag in the pay packets of their Employees at the coal terminal.

Wiggins Island Coal Terminal is jointly owned by Glencore, Yancoal and Coronado. All three Companies have posted massive profits over the last two years, including Glencore’s 198% increase on its 2021 profit.

“It is ludicrous that these companies, whose representatives sit on the Coal Terminals board and determine what pay increases WICET Employees receive, can post such massive profits and not provide a wage that addresses the previous wages suppression and cost of living pressures for workers who are critical to delivering these Companies record profits.

“By taking industrial action, workers are sending a strong message to WICET’s board, management, and the owner companies that they are willing to take a stand for a comprehensive enterprise agreement inclusive of pay increases to address previous wage suppression, cost of living pressures and working toward closing the gap on the industry standards for Coal Export Terminals in Queensland.”

MEU members started action with on-going work bans on Tuesday and are determined to continue until they secure a better deal.

Final stretch for Same Job Same Pay laws



Next week, Senate hearings will get underway into the Albanese Government's Closing Loopholes Bill, which contains Same Job Same Pay provisions for labour hire workers.

Getting the Bill through the Senate is the final hurdle facing the Same Job Same Pay laws that our Union has campaigned for over many years.

The introduction of the Closing Loopholes Bill to Federal Parliament on September 4 was a major milestone in the long battle for justice for labour hire mineworkers.

It would allow workers and their unions to apply to the Fair Work Commission for Same Job Same Pay orders if labour hire workers at a worksite were performing the same work as permanent employees covered by an Enterprise Agreement.

When introducing the Bill, Workplace Relations Minister Tony Burke made special mention of coal miners. He gave a shout out to our member Brodie Allen, a labour hire coal miner at a Queensland coal mine who was in attendance at Parliament, saying the laws would stop him being paid less for doing the same job. Before and since coming to Government, Minister Burke has spoken to many coal miners and has expressed a strong commitment to closing the labour hire loophole commonly used in our industry to drive wages down.

Unfortunately, the Liberal Nationals and One Nation have teamed up to ensure there's a catch. Coalition and crossbench Senators including One Nation's Pauline Hanson and Malcolm Roberts voted to delay a Senate Inquiry into the Bill – and therefore the date the new laws can come into effect.

Despite being on track to smoothly pass through the lower house, the Senate opposition voted to extend the due date of their report into the Closing Loopholes Bill until February next year. They voted to give themselves almost five extra months to do their job, giving big business an additional five months to conduct their adversarial campaigns.

We are committed to campaigning for Same Job

Same Pay and the fair reforms included in the Closing Loopholes Bill until they pass through the Federal Parliament and become the law of the land – including participating in the Senate Hearing process.

Under the current detail of the Bill, the Union could start making applications for Same Job Same Pay orders once the legislation passes through Parliament, and orders granted by the Fair Work Commission could be enacted from November 2024. We will be keeping our members up to date with the details of the Bill as it travels through the Parliament.

In addition to closing the labour hire loophole, the Bill would also end the permanent casual rort, give greater protections to gig workers and finally ensure that employers who knowingly steal wages face criminal consequences.

Even though Labor came to office promising these reforms, Coalition and One Nation Senators have said their concern was the length and complexity of the Bill.

We believe Australian workers see this move for what it is: a delaying tactic to avoid paying workers their fair share, even if just for a few more months. Business is continuing to campaign hard against the reforms, with fresh claims in the papers each day about how the sky will fall in if workers are paid properly.

We can expect the Coalition and their One Nation helpers to keep fighting tooth-and-nail to prevent the Bill from passing and ending big business' rorts. After all, One Nation has form when it comes to using their numbers in the Senate to overturn rights for labour hire and casual workers.

While the Senate delay is a setback, we remain confident that the Closing Loopholes Bill will successfully pass through the Parliament.

How coal miners keep our rescue choppers flying

Our latest MEU podcast episode looks at the life-saving work of the Westpac Rescue Helicopter and how coal miners play a vital role funding these 'angels of the sky'.



Listen here!

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