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July 2025



Ulan Underground Members

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Glencore Pays More Next Door

MEU members at Ulan Underground have had enough of second-class wages. Last week, off the back of industrial action starting the week before, they walked off the job and hit the streets, demanding the same pay as their workmates just two kilometres away at Ulan West.

Ulan Underground miners are paid 11.5 per cent less than those at Ulan West, despite cutting the same coal seam for the same company - Glencore.

“We’re just asking for fairness” said Craig Carberry, Southwest District Vice President. The pay gap has been a flashpoint throughout more than 16 months of stalled bargaining.

Members say it is about respect and fairness for their work and for the community where both mines site side by side.

Adding to the anger is Glencore’s increasing reliance on higher paid, non-local contractors at Ulan Underground. It’s a sensitive balance to be struck in a town that relies on local mining jobs, but Mudgee locals think Glencore has tipped the balance too far.



Over 100 members marched through the main street of Mudgee in a powerful show of strength, cheered on by local businesses and residents.

The Ulan Underground Lodge has vowed to keep rolling stoppages and other actions going until Swiss multinational Glencore puts a fair deal on the table.



Remembering Hunter Valley No. 1 (1997): the Rio Tinto playbook - and its Pilbara legacy

In the winter of 1997, Rio Tinto used Hunter Valley No. 1 as a test bed for a new industrial strategy: push individual contracts, marginalise the union, and use the courts and John Howard's new Workplace Relations Act to curb pickets and solidarity.

Management offered 10% pay-rise staff deals conditional on resigning from the union; only a handful took them as more than 400 miners walked and held a six-week stoppage backed by families and the broader movement.

The government lined up behind the company, while Rio Tinto sought Supreme Court orders to limit the picket - an early demonstration of how the 1996 laws could be weaponised against collective action.

It's a dispute that mattered far beyond the Hunter. Rio Tinto's role foreshadowed a national shift: a sustained drive to replace union agreements with individual contracts and non-union arrangements.

Nowhere were the long-term effects clearer than in Rio Tinto's Pilbara iron ore business.

Through the late 1990s and 2000s, Rio Tinto accelerated "staff contracts" and AWAs across iron ore, aluminium and bauxite - engineering a de-unionisation that reshaped power on site.

Over time, centralised control and technology deepened that shift: a remote operations centre opened in Perth (2009–10) and fully autonomous "AutoHaul" trains followed in 2019, further moving decision-making - and leverage - away from mine gates. The rise of FIFO (about 70% of Rio's Pilbara workforce) also dispersed communities that once sustained collective organisation.

Yet the story isn't finished. After decades "on the outer," unions are rebuilding in the Pilbara. In March 2025, more than 400 workers at Rio Tinto's Paraburdoo signed for collective bargaining - the first step toward an enterprise agreement in over two decades. The same determination that held the Hunter line in 1997 is re-emerging in WA's iron ore heartland.



Deadly July: Four Tragedies That Reshaped Coalmine Safety



July has carved some of the blackest lines in Australia's industrial history. Between 1902 and 1990, four catastrophic explosions claimed 140 lives and forced major safety reforms that still protect workers today.

Mount Kembla, NSW – 31 July 1902 (96 deaths).

Australia's worst industrial disaster erupted when methane ignited deep inside the Illawarra seam. The blast thundered 11 km to Wollongong and killed miners as young as fourteen. A Royal Commission exposed management's knowledge of lethal gas levels and recommended gas testing, mechanical ventilation and a ban on naked flame lamps - changes that were somehow only slowly implemented over two decades.

Box Flat, QLD – 31 July 1972 (18 deaths).

A weekend fire smouldered unseen until fan ventilation drew explosive gases across the flame, obliterating two rescue teams. With further blasts imminent, the pit was sealed, entombing fourteen men. Queensland subsequently mandated personal filter selfrescuers, surface gas chromatography and modern underground firefighting gear.

Appin, NSW – 24 July 1979 (14 deaths).

Methane ignited three kilometres from the pithead, killing miners eating their midshift meal. Judge Goran's inquiry slammed "continual breaches" of gas laws and demanded realtime monitoring, alarms, better ventilation and more union check inspectors - steps that became national benchmarks.

Moura No. 4, QLD – 16 July 1986 (12 deaths).

A roof collapse displaced methane that was likely sparked by a flame safety lamp - ironically the device long used to detect gas. The explosion ended 12 lives and prompted the immediate withdrawal of flame lamps, compulsory induction training, continuous gas monitoring and rigorous secondary extraction plans.

Across these tragedies a single thread runs: every catastrophe was foreseeable, every life lost a consequence of ignored warnings. Each Royal Commission and coronial finding widened the legal duty of care, bolstered union safety powers and advanced technology -from selfrescuers to sophisticated gas sensors. Yet those gains exist only while workers and regulators insist on them.

As coal communities again pause in July to ring the memorial bells, we remember not only the fallen but the hardwon protections written in their names.

While we remember their legacy; ours is to defend it - every shift, every site.



What would you say if you had five minutes alone with the federal Government and the big end of town?

Next month, union representatives will walk into a landmark meeting with ministers and employer groups to talk about the shape of work in Australia. They want to carry one thing above all else: the lived experience of the people like you - people who actually clockon, sweat, innovate and keep the country running.

That is where you come in. The Australian union movement is launching a fast, five-minute survey designed to collect candid stories from workers across every sector - importantly including mine workers. The questions are simple: Does management genuinely listen when you suggest a safer or smarter way to do the job? Do you have the training and technology you need? Can you see a real career pathway, or are you jumping from roster to roster with no security?

For years we have been told that “flexibility” and “productivity” are the only measures that matter. Workers know there is far more at stake: decent wages, predictable rosters, safe sites, strong apprenticeships and a fair share of the gains from new technology.

Scan the QR code or visit
<https://www.australianunions.org.au/campaigns/workplace-truths-survey/>

By filling out the survey you ensure that our delegates walk into the meeting armed with concrete evidence rather than abstract statistics.

The timing could not be more critical. The federal government is finalising its Future of Work agenda, employers are sharpening their push to automate, and artificial intelligence is creeping into everything from rostering apps to remoteoperated equipment. If we are not in the room, decisions will be made without us.

Mining and Energy Union members have never been shy about standing up. When work isn't safe, we stop it. When labour hire threatened permanent jobs, we fought for Same Job Same Pay. This survey is another tool in that same toolbox: collective power expressed through thousands of individual voices.

Take five minutes, scan the QR code to visit the website, and tell us exactly what you think. Your answers will remain confidential, but the message they carry will be delivered in the strongest possible terms:

We are the people who do the work. We know what works - and what doesn't. And we expect to be heard.



Farewell, Buff

This month, we're wishing a long and happy retirement to lead Queensland organiser and MEU legend Richard 'Buff' Staker. Buff has been instrumental in growing the Mining and Energy Union in Queensland over decades of service, as well as imparting his deep experience and union values to the next generation of MEU organisers.



Buff began his union career as a site delegate of the FEDFA at the Dalrymple Coal Terminal near Hay Point, Central Queensland. In the early 1990s, leadership issues in the Queensland Branch of the union necessitated introducing fresh rank-and-file members into official roles. Despite never intending to stand for such a position, Buff put his hand up at a site meeting in Dalrymple as a short-term stopgap.

It was the start of a 35-year career in the union movement.

Buff became Vice President in the union, overseeing the coal terminals in Rockhampton and Mackay. He was immediately thrown in the deep end, seeing the FEDFA through the process of amalgamation into the CFMEU Mining and Energy Division. This was when he first became an official with the miners.

During this time, Buff earned a reputation for his old-school union values. He held a deep intolerance for unfairness and took great pride in sticking up for people being mistreated.

Those who've met Buff know this is because he genuinely and deeply believes in the trade union project and loves that he has been able to contribute to it and build union power.

In the early 2000s, Buff took up his first organising role with the Transport Workers Union, covering truckies along the coast around Mackay, Sarina, and Rockhampton, and all the way inland to Longreach. He developed a principle of meeting people where they are – oftentimes literally, holding meetings at rest stops and on the side of the road – to genuinely engage with their concerns and issues.

In December 2006, Buff returned to the miners. At the time, the then Mining and Energy Division was setting up Unite, a national organising team to supplement the efforts of our lodges and districts in growing the union. Buff was one of the first organisers recruited to the fledgling team and proved invaluable in setting up the foundations for success.

Farewell, Buff

Over the years, Buff honed his skills as an organiser, proving able to move very easily between different groups of people and understand their concerns. Rather than front-loading the conversation or resorting to high-pressure tactics, Buff has always taken potential members on a journey, listened to their concerns, and helped them see why joining is both the right thing to do and in their interest.

Buff's adaptability is also notable. He was in his fifties when he became an organiser, a totally unique profession and one he never expected to undertake. He underwent a personal journey going from worker to official to organiser, which left him as a source of experience and perspective for the other members of the Unite team.

In 2020, Buff became Head Organiser for Unite in Queensland. He brought a lot of cohesion and harmony to Unite and helped stabilise and grow the outfit during a challenging and busy time. At the beginning of his tenure, the labour hire rort was continuing to spread in the industry, and OS was being established on BHP's Queensland coalfields.



However, in the years since, that outlook has changed dramatically. Buff's leadership was instrumental in the success of Same Job Same Pay, particularly in the recruitment of labour hire workers to the union.

As Head Organiser, Buff has always led by example. He'd never ask someone to do something he wouldn't do himself and always seeks to tackle challenges head-on. He has high standards and expects effort, but he holds himself to them before criticising others. The only exception is his dislike of home visits, which he says makes him feel like a Jehovah's Witness.

Buff's career and his inexhaustible energy have set a high example for young MEU organisers. His wisdom, good humour and steadfast values will be sorely missed, both in the office and out on the road.





Leadership Message

Memo to mining companies: Same Job Same Pay is here to stay

We have had another major victory in our fight for Same Job Same Pay.

On 7 July, we finally received the news thousands of BHP labour hire mineworkers had been waiting for. The Fair Work Commission handed down its decision on applications for Same Job Same Pay at Goonyella Riverside, Peak Downs and Saraji mines, paving the way for an order to lift Operations Services, Workpac, and Chandler McLeod workers' pay.

This is the culmination of years of campaigning and advocacy on the part of the Mining and Energy Union. BHP Operations Services has come to represent the absolute worst of the labour hire model, shamelessly designed to subvert enterprise agreements, deny union access, and drive down miners' wages.

The Commission's decision confirms that BHP subsidiary Operations Services is not materially different from other labour hire providers, despite BHP's protestations and creative corporate structuring.

It's not over yet however. BHP have already made submissions to the Commission trying to delay the orders being issued, foreshadowing an eventual appeal the Federal Court. Having apparently not learnt already that they should be paying their workers rather than lawyers, BHP is gearing up for a second round in the hopes that they can get the Same Job Same Pay decision overturned. We're ready for this fight, but BHP's tactics show a callous disregard for the Operations Services workers covered by the order. The MEU is pushing for OS workers to receive their pay rise under the order before it goes back to court, because BHP should not be rewarded for kicking the can down the road.

Leadership Message Cont'd

BHP is not acting in isolation, however, as many employers have decided that delaying and frustrating the Same Job Same Pay process is the best strategy to avoid paying. Too many workers in the coal industry are still waiting for Same Job Same Pay when they are clearly eligible under the intent of the law.

The owners of many of our coal mines and the bosses of labour hire companies are determined to fight our applications in court, preferring to spend millions paying lawyers rather than their workers.

This has devolved from genuine legal challenges when the laws were new into shameless timewasting tactics to delay the orders being issued and put off having to pay a fair rate.

For example, the MEU lodged our application covering WorkPac mineworkers at Hunter Valley Operations nine months ago. Due to being granted excessive time to prepare their case and availability issues for WorkPac's lawyers, it ultimately wasn't heard until early May, then extended into June, and still hasn't officially concluded. The delays got so bad that we agreed to provide submissions in writing. WorkPac's lawyers insisted we hold them in person – only to end up saying not much of anything.



Grahame Kelly
General Secretary

We wish this was an isolated case, but this conduct is unfortunately becoming the norm. Labour hire miners at Mt Owen, Mangoola, Tahmoor, Caval Ridge, Broadmeadow and Ravensworth are all still awaiting a result in their cases, despite the MEU filing each application last year.

These employers leaving their own workers in the lurch, uncertain of whether they'll get an order or when it will be handed down, in order to put off what is increasingly seen as inevitable.

The federal Labor Government went to the 2022 election with Same Job Same Pay clearly on their agenda. They did as they said they would do and passed legislation to implement Same Job Same Pay in December 2023, with the laws taking effect from November 2024.

We are now into the second half of 2025. There's no question that mine operators and labour hire companies have had plenty of time to adjust to new requirements and take steps to understand and implement Same Job Same Pay.

If there was any lingering doubt, the significant decision by the full bench of the Federal Court regarding BHP's Queensland mines should make it clear to everyone in the industry that a labour hire worker performing the same work as a permanent worker under a site EA deserves the same rate of pay. They should stop stalling and start paying.



**SCAN THE QR CODE TO LISTEN
TO THE LATEST MEU PODCAST
EPISODE ON THIS TOPIC!**

Called into the boss' office?



Here's what you need to know

Have you been called in for a meeting with your boss? Are you facing a workplace investigation? The MEU is here to help you get through it.

An employee facing a workplace investigation has rights, including procedural fairness. The employee must have the opportunity to adequately respond to all allegations, including any that emerge during the investigation process, before any decision is reached.

Before the meeting

When you have been informed of a meeting taking place, notify your delegate or contact the Union immediately. Notify them of the time and location of the meeting. It is important that your union reps know as soon as possible so they can take action and prepare you.

If you are called into a disciplinary meeting without warning, ask for the meeting to be rescheduled.

Ask your delegate to accompany you to the meeting. If they are unable to attend, arrange for an alternative support person to go. Inform the company contact who will be with you at the meeting.

Arrange to meet with your chosen support person prior to the meeting to discuss the incident or event that led to the investigation/meeting, and potential outcomes. Make them aware of any previous disciplinary action that may be documented on your employment record before the meeting.

Collate any relevant and important evidence to support your response if you are aware of the investigation subject.

The meeting

You should expect a minimum of 24 hours' notice before the start of the meeting. The meeting may be held face-to-face, over the phone, or via video conference. In each case, your elected support person should be with you.

You may be stood down/stood aside on full pay while the investigation takes place, which should be detailed in a written letter from your employer. You may be instructed not to access any company property or computers while stood down/stood aside.

Called into the boss' office?

You will be told the confidentiality requirements of the matter.

You are able to seek legal advice and assistance from your support person and the Union, but the employer is not required to inform you of this.

You may not be informed of the accusations made until you attend the meeting. If this is the case, request that the allegations be provided in writing.

The meeting may be attended by a company officer and a second person taking notes. The meeting facilitator will state the roles of the attendees and that the matter could result in disciplinary action up to and including termination of the employee's employment.

There is no set time frame that an investigation is required to be completed in. Due to several factors that can impact the investigator's ability to gather information, these matters can take a significant amount of time which the Union has no control over.

After the meeting

Debrief with your support person. If they're not a union representative, be sure to contact the Union to notify us of the outcome. Continue to update your support person in the days or weeks after the meeting, especially if the company contacts you. Maintain confidentiality of the matter. Do not interact with any other people who may be involved in the investigation.

If you are stood down/stood aside, do not attempt to access or use any company property. Remain contactable at the times that align with your normal rostered hours of work.

See your doctor or mental health specialist to assist with stress management. Remember, the Union can provide you with the contact details of independent services that deal with stress and trauma.

Be honest, reach out, and know your rights. The MEU is here to support you.

MEU Podcast with Dr Liam Byrne

Bob Hawke could scull a beer faster than anyone on the planet, he also gave us Medicare. But when he was a union advocate what was so special about him people wanted him to be Prime Minister? We find out and meet a heap of other union legends who brought us the rights we all enjoy at work today.



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