

# Australia: Two workers killed in separate incidents at Queensland mine

Mark Wilson  
8 September 2024

Two mining workers were killed during August in separate incidents at the Byerwen Coal Mine in central Queensland, Australia. This brought the official number of miners who have lost their lives in the state of Queensland's mining sector during the past decade to 26.

That indicates the total disregard for workers' safety and lives by the mining corporations and the state and federal Labor governments.

The Byerwen Mine, owned by QCoal, is located near the small rural town of Glenden. It is one of several major coal mines in the Bowen Basin, which contains the largest coal reserves in Australia. QCoal owns, either fully or in part, five of those mines. Byerwen employs approximately 800 workers "at peak capacity," according to QCoal.

The first incident at the mine claimed the life of Chris Schloss on August 3. Schloss, a husband and father of five, was remembered by his colleague, Ben Hannant, in comments to the media as "the heart and soul of the Byerwen mining camp and the safest bloke I know." The 48-year-old miner was fatally struck by the boom of a pick and carry crane after it rolled over.

The incident was far from an isolated one. A Resources Safety and Health Queensland bulletin released 12 months before Schloss was killed noted "19 dozer rollover incidents from January 2022 to August 2023." That is, an average of one incident per month. Three of the incidents resulted in crane operators being hospitalised with injuries.

The second death occurred less than three weeks later. John Linwood, aged 56, was killed in the early afternoon of August 22. The incident involved a collision between two vehicles at the surface of the mine. Linwood was driving the smaller of the two. The paramedics who arrived on the scene found Linwood

with fatal injuries and declared him dead on site.

Mining is responsible for an average of eight deaths per year in Australia. It has the third highest fatality rate per worker, only behind agriculture/forestry/fishing, and transport/postal/warehousing, and marginally ahead of construction.

Six miners have been killed on the job in Australia this year. Three of those have been in Queensland—27-year-old Luke O'Brien was killed in January when he was crushed while working at the Saraji Mine, also in the Bowen Basin.

Yet this is not inherent to the work of mining itself. Experts have pointed out that mining could, with the necessary safety precautions in place, be undertaken without any deaths occurring.

Speaking on the August 2024 Byerwen deaths, Professor David Cliff from the University of Queensland's Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre stated that "vehicle accidents are preventable. People getting crushed by things are preventable." He continued: "I can see no reason why we still have fatalities."

His colleague Professor Robin Burgess-Limerick, a researcher at the same institute, stated: "It is definitely possible to mine without fatalities."

The Queensland state Labor government has taken no action to implement such a possibility. Instead, it is committed to ensuring mining companies can extract as much profit from their workers as possible, regardless of the dangers it poses to them.

Following Linwood's death, Resources Minister Scott Stewart claimed that legislation introduced by Labor was resulting in a "change of culture." In reality, there has been no improvement in Queensland mining fatalities since Labor took office in 2015. At least 14

people, including Schloss and Linwood, have died working in Queensland mines since 2019.

Similarly, Mining and Energy Union (MEU) officials joined the government in giving the go-ahead for the Byerwen mine to quickly resume operations. MEU district president Mitch Hughes said the company “provided some evidence which demonstrates that they can resume operations safely at this stage,” but gave no specifications on what that evidence supposedly was.

As a result, despite being initially sent home after Linwood’s death, the Byerwen workers have been brought back to work at the mine even while an investigation into the incident is underway.

The lack of safety measures that resulted in the deaths of the two workers has not been resolved, meaning that the workforce has been sent back to an unsafe working environment at the behest of QCoal and with the green light of the Labor government and the MEU leaders.

Efforts by Labor and the MEU apparatus to present themselves as champions of workers’ safety in light of the recent tragedies are fraudulent. They are attempting to head off the anger of mining workers in the face of repeated, preventable deaths.

As one example of this, over 200 miners at the nearby Grosvenor coal mine signed a petition calling for the dismissal of their entire senior leadership team after an explosion in 2020 that critically injured five workers. The petition stated that management “have given us no reason to believe they have addressed the culture of poor safety or that they have put in place measures that will prevent a repeat disaster.”

Those concerns were vindicated most starkly four years later. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, a month-long underground fire at Grosvenor in July and August endangered the 150 workers on site at the time.

Stewart’s pro-company record on behalf of the Labor government was on display after the 2020 Grosvenor tragedy, when he ruled out changes to legislation that could have compelled witnesses at an inquiry to give all relevant evidence.

The state government also supported the demand by Anglo American, the Grosvenor mine operator, to remove health and safety expert Professor Andrew Hopkins from the inquiry. The cited reason was that Hopkins had explained the similarities between the 2020 explosion and the 1994 disaster that killed 11

workers at BHP’s Moura No.2 coal mine.

The danger to workers in mines is not limited to physical safety. A 2023 study noted that “several studies have documented associations between occupational injury and suicide risk.” Despite limitations in available industry data, it provided evidence that suicide rates of Australian miners may be up to twice as high, compared to workers from other industries. The authors suggested that conditions such as “low job control and high job demands” may be contributing to this elevated suicide risk.

The pro-corporate record of Labor and the union bureaucrats exposes illusions that they will take any genuine action over mine workers’ safety, mental health or working conditions. Under the capitalist system, profits always come before lives. There has to be a turn by all workers to fight for a socialist reorganisation of society so that large corporations are placed under public ownership and democratic control, and workers themselves can implement the necessary changes to protect lives.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**