

NYMBOIDA: The Coal Mine the Workers Run

As Cliff Bultitude left the dark recesses of the Nymboida underground coal mine behind on a bright, hot summer Friday afternoon, his mind was on a refreshing shower, a cold beer and the weekend ahead. However, the bright light of day that greeted Cliff and his fellow coalminers at the pit top was clouded by news that the mine was closing and they were on a week's notice.

To add insult to injury, the Nymboida coal miners were told that their employer had no money to pay them the tens of thousands of dollars they were owed in severance pay, annual leave and other entitlements. The miners were told that their last shift would finish on Friday February 14, 1975 and after that they were on their own.

Cliff Bultitude had worked at the Nymboida mine since 1953. Many of his 30 workmates had spent all or most of their working lives at Nymboida. The loss of their jobs would devastate them and their families.

No one knew better than the Nymboida miners just how bleak their future was. The mine was on the outskirts of the northern New South Wales city of Grafton and unemployment in the region was among the highest in Australia. The nearest coal mines were hundreds of kilometers south.

The miners and their families spent the next few days absorbing the shock of the loss facing them - no jobs and all their entitlements gone up in smoke. They turned to their union, the Miners Federation, which advised them to fight.

And fight they did. Underground coal miners work in the most dangerous industry in the world. Every year, more than 20,000 coal miners are killed at work while hundreds of thousands more are injured. They are hard and fair men who depend on each other for survival working in the bowels of the Earth. The Nymboida mineworkers showed just how tough and determined they were when they refused to accept the sack and began a work-in on the day that the mine was to close.

Community Support

The community and the trade union movement rallied in support. With public support behind the Nymboida miners, a series of negotiations involving the union and the New South Wales government finally resulted in ownership of the mine being handed over to the Miners Federation in return for the debts owed by the operating company being discharged.

The Nymboida miners' victory was heralded in the media. The Australian headlined it: 'Sacked miners now own the coal mine', while The Daily Telegraph ran with: 'Union to run the mine'.

Although expressing a different emphasis, both headlines were right. The mine was run by the union and the workers through a company, Union Coal Mining Pty Ltd, for the next four and a half years, with all employees retaining their jobs. The directors of the company were Miners Federation National and Northern District officials and the then Nymboida lodge secretary. The Nymboida Committee of Management was made up of rank and file mineworkers at the pit.

The mine the workers ran finally closed in August 1979, when its coal reserves were exhausted. By then, in its four and a half years as a Miners Union operation, Nymboida workers had received over \$ 1.25 million in gross wages - money which, if it had not been for the work-ins and takeover, would have been lost to the mineworkers and their families, and to the Grafton community. In addition, all the Nymboida mineworkers received their full benefits when the mine closed, including five who had retired during the years of the Miners Federation's operation.

Nymboida proved that a trade union could profitably operate a mine where a private company failed.

A New Beginning

This was a lesson not lost on the then New South Wales Wran Labor government, which responded in October 1979 by granting the Miners Federation a replacement mining lease in the rich Upper Hunter Valley region of New South Wales.

Thus from the ashes of Nymboida rose the exciting new initiative of United Collieries, a new joint venture involving the Miners Federation as the lease owner and a number of big mining companies who provided the finance for the development of the mine.

However, there was fierce opposition within business and conservative political circles, which feared that not only would the union have a valuable insight into the business of running a mine and selling coal, but it might use profits from its involvement to store up a war chest to finance industrial campaigns against the employers.

From the outset, though, the union made it clear that, whatever earnings it would accrue in the future from United, they would not go into union coffers. Rather, the money would be channeled into a trust fund for the benefit of mineworkers' families and communities.

New Jobs

When the Miners Federation went into this project, it was venturing into new territory for any union in Australia. The union got involved for three main reasons. The first was to promote employment opportunities.

In 1991, United was the first underground mine developed in New South Wales in more than a decade, creating more than 200 new permanent mining jobs and 500 more in the community.

Second, the involvement in United presented the union with a unique insight into the operation of Australia's coal industry. Miners Union representatives still chair and sit on the United Collieries Board of Directors. The union became much more aware of the economic circumstances and marketplace complexities in which companies operate.

And third, the union aimed to generate funds to assist mineworkers, their families and communities.

In 1991, the Mineworkers Trust Fund was established with four union representatives and one New South Wales government appointee as trustees. Since then, the Trust has channeled the millions of dollars that the union earns from its ownership of the United lease back into the community.

The Trust provides annual tertiary scholarships as well as millions in funds to community organisations and projects. This has benefited hospitals, high schools, youth and sporting groups, emergency services, cultural and historical projects. Community welfare groups have also been beneficiaries, as have support groups for sick and disabled children.

These community dividends would not have been possible without the actions of that small group of Nymboida underground coalminers who had the guts in 1975 to take a stand and fight for their jobs and entitlements.

And neither would this remarkable success story have been possible without those union officials who had the courage and commitment to fight for the survival of the Nymboida Colliery and the vision to pioneer the development of United Collieries.

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