

Statement of solidarity with the members of Sintracarbón in Cerrejón in Colombia

30 union representatives from Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia and Peru gathered online to express their outrage at the situation in Carbones del Cerrejón Limited Colombia. Cerrejón is owned by the multinationals BHP, Angloamerican and Glencore.

The president of the National Union of Coal Industry Workers (Sintracarbón, affiliated to IndustriALL Global Union), Igor Díaz, reported during the meeting on the conflict between the company and the workers.

According to the union leader, there are 3 essential problems: Cerrejón is trying to cut back the benefits provided in the collective bargaining agreement; the company wants to modify work shifts that have been in force for 20 years; and the number of COVID-19 infections in the Cerrejón mines continues to rise.

Workers affiliated to the union were balloted between August 13 to 20 and were asked to decide whether to come out on strike or submit the differences between the parties to a decision of an arbitration tribunal.

At the end of the day on the 20th August, the results showed that 99.03% of members had voted to go on strike to settle the labour dispute with Cerrejón. With this action, the union has shown that it rejects the unilateral decision of the company to introduce the so-called death shift.

If the change were implemented, it would mean that one of the crews would be disbanded leading to a 25 percent reduction in jobs, i.e. 1200 workers would find themselves out of work. By the same token, the union is opposed to the company's attempts to roll back the benefits established in the current collective agreement.

For example, the company wants to eliminate some of the transportation arrangements whereby workers are driven to the mines. The intention is to move employees to new homes that are closer to the mines. Finally, the union has reported that there is high level of Covid-19 infections in the Cerrejón mines.

From May until the present day, more than 250 workers from the production company have been infected with the virus and 2 workers have died from COVID-19 in the mines (one a direct employee, one a contractor). The members of the BHP Global Union Network therefore express their solidarity with the Sintracarbón workers and support the decision to call a strike.

The Network calls on Cerrejón to respect the rights of workers, not only with regard to the benefits negotiated in the collective agreement but also the principles of health and safety in the workplace. All companies have a responsibility both to their shareholders and their workers.