

Namibian Rossing Mine Workers Fight Back Against Chinese State

By Namibia Daily News

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WINDHOEK — The Namibian Rossing mine, one of the largest open-pit uranium mines in the world, has been embroiled in a labour dispute with the Mineworkers Union of Namibia (MUN) since August 2020. The dispute began after the state-owned Chinese National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) purchased a 68.62% stake in the mine from Australian mining giant Rio Tinto Zinc in July 2019.

In August 2020, the entire Rossing branch executive committee of the MUN was fired by the CNNC after refusing to allow the Chinese owners to do away with basic health and safety standards in the collective agreement at the mine. The former Rossing branch chairperson Johannes Hamutenya worked for the mine for 14 years before being fired, along with eight other members of the executive committee.

The new owners insisted on changing the 33-year-old MUN recognition agreement and unilaterally altering terms and conditions of employment at the workplace, breaching Namibia's labour laws. The CNNC RUL also requested the removal of the union's offices, archives, and boardrooms at the mine, the removal of safety officers and affirmative action monitors, and a reduction in annual and sick leave days. The CNNC RUL also attempted to breach the Affirmative Action Act by choosing what to pay individual employees, whereas the act clearly states that jobs of equal value must be compensated equally.

After repeated attempts by the shop stewards to seek justice in different courts, the case was initially scheduled for arbitration in April 2021, but the company opposed this, demanding that the case be heard in the Labour Court. This was thrown out by the Labour Court on 8 June 2021, and the case was rescheduled for arbitration, which finally took place on May 31, 2022.

However, the arbitrator's ruling in favour of the workers has not been implemented, and the CNNC has continued to stall the process through corruption and collusion with the SWAPO government, keeping the workers unemployed.

On the three-year anniversary of the Rossing mine union leaders' illegal discharge by the CNNC, a hearing was scheduled for March 28, 2023, with actions planned at the San Francisco Chinese Consulate and other consulates and embassies around the world in solidarity with the miners.

The labour dispute between the MUN and CNNC RUL has set the stage for future battles in Africa against union busting by Chinese state-owned entities. In China, the only legal unions are those affiliated with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), an organ of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Any attempt to establish an independent trade union is seen by the Chinese Communist Party as a political threat, and union committee activities are usually restricted to handing out gifts on holidays and organising social functions, rather than advocating strongly for workers' rights.

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