

RESOURCES and REALITY

THE NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS AND VOICE FOR MINING

OPINION: ROB CROSBY

“Mining is central to the prosperity of our region, vital to our state and such a big part of our community. So it is wonderful to have mining, an industry that is one of the pillars of our region, support our club now and into the future.”

- Phil Gardner, Newcastle Knights CEO.

For the past decade, the Newcastle Knights have held a Voice For Mining initiative celebrating the connection between the club and the mining industry in the Newcastle and Hunter region.

As part of the annual recognition of the connection, a hi-vis playing strip, modelled on the workwear worn by miners, was introduced for the first time in 2014 and has become a regular fixture of the NRL team alongside the home, away and Indigenous strips ever since.

In creating a sense of occasion for Voice For Mining, the club has frequently played on blue collar myths of overcoming toughness to draw a parallel between the players on the field and the workers going underground for hours at a time.

These myths, often invoking the names of past and current players associated with the mining industry, present an appealing story - but one that is more 'truthiness' than truth.

Mining is one of many industries employing thousands of workers in Newcastle and the Hunter, yet it is afforded an elevated status that doesn't reflect the makeup of employment in the local and wider population.

In looking at the latest employment figures released through the Australian Government's Labour Market Insights, a reality that goes against the narrative of Voice for Mining is clear for all to see:

“Mining is a small employing industry. Around 2.2% of workers have their main job in this industry.”

At a state level, mining accounted for 0.8% of all employment in NSW.

In Newcastle and Lake Macquarie, 2.5% of workers were employed in the industry, while employment growth was expected to decline by 2025.

The figures in the Hunter Valley reflect mining in a comparatively positive light with 8% of all workers and miners ranking as the second highest employing occupation in the region.

By contrast, industries such as Health Care and Social Assistance (15.1%), Retail Trade (11.4%), Construction (9.3%) and Manufacturing (8.3%) all employed more workers in the Hunter.

So why is it that the Newcastle Knights have dedicated one of their finite number of home matches in support of an industry that accounts for such a small percentage of the population?

The answer, to the chagrin of people who were incensed by the inclusion of a rainbow stripe on a jersey barely a month ago, is that sport is political.

We live in a time where there is an unwillingness by portions of the population to recognise that all aspects of society and life are political.

The same principle applies to the National Rugby League.

Indigenous Round is political. Women in League is political. Allowing advertising for gambling to become a fixture of rugby league coverage is political. Holding ANZAC Day ceremonies outside of April 25 is political. The consideration to introduce a round highlighting the importance of mental health is political.

Rugby League by its definition was born out of the political actions of players demanding better working conditions.



A coal ship arrives to port in Newcastle. Photo by Daniel Norris on Unsplash

Wearing a hi-vis jersey and singing the virtues of an industry that accounts for a fraction of overall employment is also political, not only in what is being said, but in the very real consequences that are being omitted from the conversation.

Mining unquestionably contributes significantly to Australia's economy. But we do not live in an economy - we live in a society where the population requires a healthy environment in order to sustain life.

The Voice for Mining initiative is, at best, benign in reinforcing myths about the role of mining in Newcastle and the Hunter region. At worst, it is a display of soft power intended to undermine concerns about the impacts of mining fossil fuels on climate change.

You can be shocked by that last statement, but after the Black Summer bushfires, one-in-one-hundred year events becoming regular occurrences and the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report, it is irrefutable that the consequences of mining contribute to natural disasters that are more frequent and intense.

This is not to say that the entire mining industry should immediately cease to exist (as some bad faith actors who continue to sing the praises of nuclear power would have you believe).

Implementing a just transition where people employed in the mining industry are provided with paid training to move into different sectors, and, where necessary, workers are financially supported if retraining is not possible will be crucial in the years leading up to the closure of more and more coal-fired power stations.

The future of energy exists in transitioning to renewables; the only questions remaining are how soon it happens and whether workers are supported or left behind.

Right now, the clock is ticking on the viability of mining. The Newcastle Knights should consider the same when it comes to Voice For Mining.

***And as this is still technically about rugby league... Knights by 6.**