

# OPENING DOORS FOR AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS MINERS

AS AUSTRALIA'S MINING INDUSTRY FORTIFIES ITSELF AS THE BACKBONE OF THE NATION'S ECONOMY, MAJOR RESOURCES COMPANIES AND ABORIGINAL-OWNED CONTRACTORS LOOK TO STRENGTHEN THE PRESENCE OF INDIGENOUS WORKERS IN THE INDUSTRY. **NICKOLAS ZAKHARIA** WRITES.

**A**ustralia's mining workforce is made up of almost 250,000 workers that are scattered across the country.

It's a telling sign that mining is heading in the right direction, with employment levels rising by more than 10 per cent in the past five years.

With business surging, many mining companies are taking more responsibility in supporting local employment of Indigenous people.

According to the Australian Government's Closing the Gap Report 2020, the Indigenous employment rate was at 49 per cent in 2018. The areas most affected were classed as remote or very remote locations, which are primarily where mining operations take place.

To tackle these figures, Aboriginal-owned mining companies, including IronMerge and Western Labour Hire are working with communities to kickstart the careers of local Indigenous people.

## Merging jobs with local communities

IronMerge, a Supply Nation Aboriginal-owned mining and civil works service company, aims to provide services that improve the economic and employment standing of local Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

The company prides itself on being a Nyamal family business and offers direct employment for Nyamal people in the Pilbara.

Its fundamentals are based on the key principle of reconciliation, with IronMerge striving to enhance Australia's Indigenous workforce in

the mining industry and beyond.

IronMerge is proactively helping to provide a better and more prosperous future for Australia's Indigenous communities – and this comes directly from its leadership team, which has strong local community ties.

"We're early in the journey but our vision is crystal clear. IronMerge is a Nyamal family business, and we are determined to generate ongoing employment opportunities in the Nyamal region by rigorously assessing our clients' needs and obligations, securing great people into our business, and ensuring we continue to refine our value proposition," IronMerge general manager of operations Brendan Milburn tells *Australian Mining*.

"The closer we align to our customers, the better placed we are to continue creating opportunities.

"Employment opportunities need to be created for Nyamal, other Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people if we are to realise our mission and to balance a diverse workforce."

IronMerge is growing its industry presence, being hired by NRW Holdings for its \$70 million contract with Fortescue Metals Group's (FMG) Iron Bridge magnetite joint venture project in Western Australia.

Fortescue has also progressed its Billion Opportunities Aboriginal procurement, having contributed upwards of \$2.5 billion in contracts for Aboriginal businesses and joint ventures since it began in 2011.

"FMG and NRW have both created opportunity for IronMerge that has enabled us to mobilise our first workers to site, including Indigenous female employees. We're on an exciting yet sustainable growth



IRONMERGE CHAIRMAN IAN TAYLOR.

trajectory due directly to FMG's and NRW's support," Milburn concludes.

IronMerge has also been working on expanding its expertise through an acquisition of Local Contracting Alliance (LCA), which helped link Indigenous mining businesses together through networking events.

LCA co-founder Matthew Shier, who is now a non-executive director on IronMerge's board, tells *Australian Mining* of his drive to build up Indigenous-owned mining businesses and employment continues today.

"The LCA became a respected forum for identifying emerging Indigenous businesses and was well supported by Reconciliation WA and Supply Nation, along with sponsorship from a number of resources companies," Shier says.

"After five years, the LCA had outgrown us: running it voluntarily in addition to juggling our individual careers and family responsibilities, we felt it was the right time to move forward into a new chapter.

"The big learning here is that collaboration opportunities are multiplied when great people, great ideas, and great conversations intersect in a welcoming and

energetic environment. It's been really rewarding to transfer the LCA's authenticity across to the IronMerge mission, as the business scales up its footprint."

## The zeal behind a local mission

Western Labour Hire is looking to make a change within the industry.

The Aboriginal-owned contractor provides open labour hire service across the mining and construction sectors in conjunction with providing employment opportunities to Indigenous people across Australia.

Founded by Adrian Connolly and his wife Dionne, Western Labour Hire provides employment and training with a focus on getting Indigenous people into work.

Since starting as a local welding business in Cloncurry, Queensland more than 10 years ago, Western Labour Hire has built up a strong list of partnerships with local companies, communities, Traditional Owners and global mining contractors.

"In the communities that we lived and worked in, we noticed that there was a high unemployment rate for indigenous people," Connolly tells *Australian Mining*.



WESTERN LABOUR HIRE ACTIVELY ENCOURAGES THE EMPLOYMENT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

that's needed."

With years of experience working alongside Indigenous communities, and actively partaking in cultural awareness programs, Connolly says there's plenty of room for improvement.

"From my experience, you sit around the table with the executives at a higher end senior management level and they're all for it," he says. "But it does not get pushed down the chain of command enough.

"There's a lot of work to be done in most places and from what I've seen a lot of work to be done when it comes to cultural awareness.

"If you're putting some entry level Indigenous employees into a work site, you need to know that their non-Indigenous co-workers are on board with the programs running and what everyone is trying to achieve.

"When they're not on board, there can be some negative views that are put out there and that does happen. They need to be fully on board and receptive of it and understand what everyone is trying to achieve and then I think there'll be a big difference."

At the end of the day, Connolly is happy he's helping make a positive impact on peoples' lives.

"It is important for the industry to show real commitment when it comes to Indigenous employment from our point of view. We just do the best we can to make a difference," he concludes. **AM**

"A lot of opportunities for training but not a lot for employment. So, we just wanted to make a little change in the best way that we could with the opportunities that we had.

"It's the passion – the passion from myself and my wife. We live and breathe it every day."

Connolly hopes to increase the employment rate of Indigenous Australians. In his view, many have TAFE qualifications but there are no jobs available due to a number of individual factors.

"Indigenous people in Australia are the most trained people in the nation," he says.

"When the government brought in funded training, especially more incentives for indigenous people it's just training but no job at the end of it. That's the problem."

Western Labour Hire aims to create pathways for Indigenous people to enter the mining industry – and for Connolly, getting successful outcomes is more important than a "tick and flick" hiring practice.

"It's not about pushing numbers for us and getting funding, it's about having those successful outcomes for us and seeing someone's life go from being non-ambitious to owning their home and spending their money wisely within a couple of years," Connolly says.

"With our skills and background, we've provided people who haven't worked in the mining industry before with a pathway into (the sector) and I suppose it's led to a

career for some people."

The difficult circumstances and environments some Indigenous people face is an area Connolly and his company actively works on improving through community engagement.

"A lot of Indigenous people have barriers to overcome and we give

them the wrap-around support required to give them the best start possible," he says.

"You've got two or three generations of people living in the same household that have never worked so it's about making those changes.

"We get in there and we do the best we can to give them support



WESTERN LABOUR HIRE AIMS TO PROVIDE TRAINING THAT TRANSLATES INTO JOBS.