

# Scabs begin training on Australian waterfront

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Encouraged by the acquiescence of the trade union movement, the National Farmers Federation (NFF) has successfully begun training a strike-breaking force of scabs at Melbourne's Webb Dock, in the middle of Australia's largest industrial port.

From the beginning of this week, between 30 and 50 trainees have been working at the dock daily, untroubled by the token "peaceful assembly" maintained by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) outside the gates.

NFF executive director Wendy Craik has proclaimed victory, boasting that the month-old operation has successfully called the "MUA's bluff" of a national waterfront stoppage.

Run by the NFF's own company, P&C Stevedoring, the Webb Dock training base is central to plans, backed by major sections of big business and the Howard government, to break waterfront strikes, inflict mass sackings and dismantle waterside jobs and working conditions.

It is no secret that the major stevedoring employers, such as Patrick's, which leased Webb Dock to the NFF, intend to use the trainees to replace entire waterfront crews, impose a major increase in casualised labour and abolish overtime and shift penalty rates.

NFF president Don McGauchie has told reporters that "training will take place around the clock" to ensure that the company has a work force of 200 trained within two months. The first recruits are already operating cranes, forklifts and other cargo handling equipment.

Only a few miles away from Webb Dock, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) held its quarterly executive meeting this week. Even before it began, ACTU president Jennie George declared that unions were unlikely to take industrial action to defend waterside workers. Over the past month the unions have not allowed a single solidarity strike, blackban or mass picket of Webb Dock.

George gave the excuse that the Howard government's Workplace Relations Act contains tough legal sanctions against solidarity action. Unions were not going to "commit a kamikaze act," she stated. In 1996 George and other ACTU officials worked closely with Cheryl Kernot, then the leader of the Australian Democrats and now a Labor Party figurehead, to ensure passage of the legislation.

The MUA has used the legislation as a pretext for undermining and then calling off industrial action by waterside

workers over the Webb Dock operation. First, the union leadership emasculated the picket line at the dock's gates, instructing workers to transform it into a "peaceful assembly." Participants were forbidden to do anything to block the entry of cranes and other equipment essential to setting up the operation.

Last week the union called off a two-and-a-half-week stoppage by 170 workers at Webb Dock. The union recommended acceptance of a return-to-work order handed down by the Industrial Relations Commission.

The MUA then limited industrial action to two 48-hour protest strikes at Patrick's nearby East Swanson Dock. As soon as the Victorian Supreme Court granted an injunction outlawing any further action, the MUA announced its compliance, without even calling a mass meeting.

While shutting down all action in Melbourne, the union has commenced negotiations with Patrick's for an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement at its other facilities around the country. The union bureaucrats still hope to strike a deal in which Patrick would abandon the NFF operation in return for the union's assistance in removing militant workers ("troublemakers"), slashing more jobs, and driving up output.

As part of its negotiating tactics, the MUA has applied to the Industrial Relations Commission for "protected strike action," as allowed in bargaining periods under the Workplace Relations Act. No such strikes have been called, but even if they were, that would hardly signal an MUA offensive against the NFF. On the contrary, isolated stoppages, restricted by the legislation to single facilities, would be used to wear down the resistance of waterfront workers and head off possible national strike action.

That has been the case in the ongoing dispute between the unions and mining giant Rio Tinto. The unions have isolated a protracted struggle by coal miners against the company's drive to break conditions at the Hunter Valley No. 1 mine. Mining union leaders argued that escalating the dispute to other Rio Tinto mines would deprive the strike of "legal protection" and incur financial damages.

As a result, Rio Tinto has been able to scrap working conditions and carry out retrenchments. This week it announced the sacking of 192 workers from the mine, on top of severe job losses at other Rio Tinto mines.

Even greater defeats for workers are looming on the

waterfront and elsewhere if matters are left in the hands of the ACTU and MUA. Emboldened by the MUA's retreats, NFF chief McGauchie has publicly admitted that P&C is now employing some of the strikebreakers involved in an aborted training operation last year at Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. The Dubai recruits included current and former army personnel.

Patrick's chairman Chris Corrigan has confirmed plans to sack the company's entire work force. Asked by the *Financial Review* last week if he was serious about sacking workers if they maintained industrial action, Corrigan replied: "We're getting close to that, yes.... If people go on abusing the certified agreements and failing to comply with them, there is a clause which could, given sufficient reason, mean they could be dismissed."

At the same time the company has launched an unspecified damages action against the MUA for losses it incurred due to the East Swanson stoppages. Such legal cases will be used to ensure that the union leadership continues to suppress demands by workers for industrial action. Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith said he expected that the union would be "sensible enough to observe the law."

One crucial development in the Australian waterfront dispute has shed light on the real relations between the trade unions and the employers. A key figure in the dispute, Patrick's Stevedoring chairman Chris Corrigan, has stated that MUA national secretary John Coombs secretly offered to get rid of "troublemakers" on the wharves.

Corrigan has produced notes that he claims were taken at a confidential meeting in the company's boardroom. According to the notes, Coombs responded to Corrigan's complaint that certain workers were troublemakers by saying: "All right, I will get rid of them - how many - 25-50, anything to get these f---ing cowboys [NFF] off the wharves."

Of course, lying and dishonesty are the stock-in-trade of the employers in their dealings with the working class. Many waterside workers have therefore tended to dismiss Corrigan's allegation out of hand.

Certain issues need to be considered, however. First, there is the response of Coombs himself. While denying that he made the offer, his main concern was that Corrigan "was in breach of an agreement not to reveal any part of the recent confidential talks."

This is an obvious contradiction. Coombs can only claim a breach of confidence if Corrigan's allegations are true - that is, only if Corrigan has released to the media part of a confidential discussion that he had promised not to make public.

Then there was the statement by MUA national official Vic Slater, who was present at the board room meeting. While rejecting Corrigan's version, Slater inadvertently admitted that a discussion on "troublemakers" had taken place. He told the *Australian Financial Review*: "I put it to Corrigan, how many

people are giving you trouble and he said, 'a handful.'"

A number of questions arise. Why is the union involved in talks behind closed doors with the employer in the first place? What was discussed that was so sensitive that an agreement was made to keep it confidential from the union membership? How many other such meetings have taken place?

Corrigan said he rejected Coombs' offer because he did not think the union could carry it out. "Frankly, I questioned his ability to deliver," he told the *Financial Review*.

Only a short time earlier the MUA leaders had demonstrated that they were more than willing to deal with "troublemakers." The union declared it would discipline one of its members who had allegedly thrown a stone at a vanload of security guards as they drove through the Webb Dock gate. The worker was promptly removed from the picket and the union announced it was considering his expulsion.

Over the past 20 years the MUA has enforced the destruction of 20,000 waterside jobs, but Corrigan's statement indicates that he and other stevedoring executives have become increasingly sceptical about the union's capacity to control its rank and file and deliver further drastic cuts.

This is at the heart of the attack initiated at Webb Dock. Major employers have determined that what remains of the militant work force - the "troublemakers" - must be cleared out and replaced.

The union bureaucrats fear that Corrigan's announcement and the scab training operation at Webb Dock mark the end of a cosy relationship in which the union has policed the work force so as to satisfy the relentless productivity demands of the employers.

The same concern exists throughout the trade union apparatus. That is why ACTU assistant national secretary Greg Combet's response to Corrigan's revelation was to complain that it would now be "next to impossible to have confidential dealings with Mr. Corrigan in the future."



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