

How the unions paved the way for Patrick's attack

Our reporter
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The Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Maritime Union of Australia have paved the way for today's assault on waterside workers, both in the long-term and the short-term.

Over the past two decades the trade union bureaucrats have assisted successive governments, Labor and Liberal, in decimating the waterfront work force and breaking up basic conditions. Since their participation in "golden handshake" redundancies during the 1970s, the unions have helped reduce the number of waterside workers to about 4,000.

Between 1989 and 1992, in particular, the MUA and ACTU worked with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and the employers to eliminate more than 5,000 jobs, through the Waterfront Industrial Reform Agreement.

The MUA's role was not confined to the waterfront. In the same period, the MUA and the rest of the "left" unions backed the Labor government to the hilt in smashing the pilots' union. Together with ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty, MUA officials cheered on the Labor leaders as they sent in the armed forces to break the pilots' strike and financially aided the airlines in recruiting scabs on a global scale. The Howard government is now using similar methods against waterside workers.

As soon as the National Farmers Federation launched its scab training base at Webb Dock, MUA National Secretary John Coombs appealed for the employers to continue their job-shedding partnership with the union. Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he pointed to the union's record from 1989 to 1992:

"In fact the workforce was halved, container crane handling rates increased by 50 percent and net ship working rates by 64 percent; labour productivity for bulk handling went up 60 percent; stevedoring costs for

container handling went down by 29 percent and container stevedoring charges were slashed by 24 percent."

Coombs argued that the MUA remained the best vehicle for Patrick's and other employers to achieve their requirements. "Reform was successful because it was a co-operative process involving the Federal Government, the stevedoring companies and the unions," he wrote.

The MUA attempted to prove that it could still discipline wharfies. Waterfront workers and their supporters blocked the National Farmers Federation's first attempts to bring giant cranes, forklifts and other equipment onto Webb Dock, but the MUA and ACTU intervened to transform the picket into a harmless "peaceful assembly." This allowed the scab training to proceed unopposed. When one worker allegedly threw a stone at a van carrying security guards, the union condemned him and vowed to take disciplinary action, including expulsion from the union.

The MUA refused to call for industrial support from other sections of the working class, or even to call out its own membership. MUA members continued to work at other Patrick's docks, and the company was permitted to divert ships to P&O wharves.

On February 16 the union ended a two-and-a-half-week stoppage by 170 workers at Webb Dock, recommending acceptance of an Industrial Relations Court return-to-work order. The MUA called two 48-hour protest strikes at Patrick's nearby East Swanston Dock, but as soon as the Victorian Supreme Court granted an injunction outlawing any further action, the union announced its compliance.

After shutting down all action, the union commenced negotiations with Patrick's for Enterprise Bargaining Agreements at its facilities around the country. The

MUA leaders still hoped to strike a deal—for Patrick’s to abandon the NFF operation in return for the union’s assistance in slashing more jobs, driving up output and removing militant workers (referred to as “troublemakers” in secret MUA discussions with Patrick’s boss Chris Corrigan).

In Coombs’s own words, the union put forward proposals to improve Patrick’s performance by introducing “productivity-linked pay and replacement of overtime pay with annualised salaries to provide an incentive for stevedoring work to be completed as quickly as possible.”

As part of its negotiating tactics, the MUA applied to the IRC for “protected strike action,” allowed in bargaining periods under the Howard government’s Workplace Relations Act. By limiting stoppages to single facilities and giving the required notice of intention to strike under the act, the union ensured the actions had minimal effect on Patrick’s operations.

When 300 workers at Sydney’s Port Botany went on strike for 48 hours on March 11, for example, the company was able to divert two ships to the P&O container operation at Port Botany and two ships to its own terminal at Darling Harbour, where they were worked by MUA members.

Similarly limited, albeit longer, stoppages followed in Sydney and Brisbane. Such “protected strike action” was designed to wear down the resistance of waterfront workers and head off possible national strike action.

At its February quarterly executive meeting, held just kilometres from Webb Dock, the ACTU said unions would not allow industrial action to defend waterside workers. ACTU President Jennie George gave the excuse that the Workplace Relations Act contains tough legal sanctions against solidarity action. Unions were not going to “commit a kamikaze act,” she stated.

The MUA also used this legislation as a pretext for calling off industrial action by its members. But the act would not exist except for the collaboration of the union bureaucracy. In 1996, after 5,000 workers stormed Parliament House in Canberra, 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.

Kernot and the ACTU leaders were intimately involved, with Reith, in drafting the final version of the

act, and specifically those sections outlawing solidarity action (so-called secondary boycotts) and prohibiting employers from paying workers who impose work bans, or take any other action deemed to be illegal. According to her former Democrats associates, Kernot personally championed the latter provision, which Patrick’s utilised against Sydney waterside workers last month.



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