

Australian Labor leaders push “peace” plan: Workers join wharf pickets

Mike Head
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Thousands of workers have taken part in large pickets on the Australian waterfront over the past few days, preventing Patrick's Stevedores, which sacked its entire labour force on April 7, from moving several thousand containers unloaded by scab labour.

Food handling and distribution workers in the state of Victoria, members of the National Union of Workers (NUW), have decided to strike for 24 hours on April 21 to support the 2,000 sacked waterside workers. On April 17 NUW members at the Franklins supermarket warehouse at Somerton, near Melbourne, walked off the job for a day to join the pickets.

Even though the unions have worked to block all calls for industrial action, workers, retired workers, professional people, students and youth have arrived on the picket lines whenever police action has been threatened. They have confronted police mobilized by both Labor and Liberal Party state governments.

First, in Fremantle, the main west coast port, several hundred workers joined the picket after West Australian riot squad police violently evicted 120 picketers at 4AM on April 16. Bolstered by the new volunteers, the picket was re-established 200 metres away.

Then in Sydney on April 17, 600 people joined the picket at Port Botany, forcing the 70 police organised by New South Wales Premier Bob Carr to give up a bid to clear a way for a convoy of trucks. Police detained 41 people and moved another 200 before advising the trucks to turn around.

In Melbourne, later that night and the next morning up to 5,000 workers and supporters confronted 1,000 police called up by Victoria Premier Jeff Kennett. At one point police cleared one gate, only to be surrounded by some 2,000 building workers who had walked off of major construction sites, such as City Link and the City

Courts.

On Monday, April 20, as more than 1,000 police regrouped for what state Police Minister Bill McGrath said would be a “bloody battle,” several truck drivers briefly blocked Footscray Road, one of western Melbourne's main access roads, in solidarity with the wharfies. The Transport Workers Union quickly denied the stoppage, claiming that the trucks had simply been queued up.

Late on Monday afternoon the Victorian Supreme Court granted Patrick's a sweeping and unprecedented injunction purporting to ban anyone from gathering or standing within 200 metres of the Melbourne waterfront. The ruling even prohibits photographs from being taken in that area. Justice Beach declared his decision was justified by “extraordinary” circumstances. About 1,000 workers remained on the picket lines on Monday evening despite the injunction.

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) national secretary John Coombs has repeatedly stated the unions' anxiety to abide by previous injunctions banning the union from picketing or supporting any efforts to block the movement of cargo. “We respect the law,” he insisted on television last Sunday. “We are doing our best to respect the injunction.”

In an attempt to head off the growing confrontation, the MUA leaders made an extraordinary offer in the Federal Court April 17 that their members would actually work for no pay, and that the union would prevent all industrial action and negotiate further “efficiency” measures if the court ordered the reinstatement of the sacked workers.

Federal Labor Party leader Kim Beazley and his New South Wales state counterpart, Premier Bob Carr, have likewise issued pleas for the Howard government to accept a “peace” plan, under which the MUA would

help slash jobs and conditions.

Beazley appealed to Howard to intervene in the dispute. He urged the Liberals to prevail upon Patrick's to reinstate the wharfies and then sit down with the MUA to negotiate on further waterfront "reform."

"We stand for waterfront reform," Beazley stated on national television on Sunday, "but in a way that preserves the unity of the nation." In other words, Beazley declared that the Labor Party leaders agree with the thrust of the government-employer offensive, but insist that it be implemented in a way that does not trigger a social explosion.

There is no doubt what Beazley means by "waterfront reform." He was a leading member of the Hawke and Keating governments that worked intimately with the MUA and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) bureaucrats to cut the waterfront work force in half between 1989 and 1992, driving up crane handling rates by 50 percent.

By the "unity of the nation" he means the entire political framework through which the Labor Party and trade union leaders have cooperated with the employers in demolishing the jobs, wages and conditions of maritime workers, and every other worker, to meet the demands of "global competitiveness."

Beazley praised the union leaders for preventing wider strike action, but warned that the Howard government was threatening the "stability of democracy" and undermining the "moral authority" of government with its close involvement in the Patrick's operation. He made a specific reference to the manner in which the Fraser Liberal government lost its "moral authority" after the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government by the governor-general.

As Prime Minister Howard has himself previously lamented, the Fraser government of 1975-83 failed to fully prosecute the demands of the ruling class for an offensive against the social position of the working class because it was afraid that the 1975 constitutional coup had already frayed the "social fabric" of the nation.

By referring to 1975, Beazley was thus warning that the very stability of capitalist rule is once again endangered, because the wide opposition throughout the working class to the attack on the wharfies is threatening to get out of the control of the Labor Party and union leaders.

A similar fear was expressed in the front page headline of the *Australian Financial Review*, the main business newspaper, on April 18: "Out of control: a nation divided." It quoted Premier Carr saying there was a "real danger of bloodshed. I'm terrified for Australia." Carr called for the dispute to be settled and warned that it would not be achieved by "police going in and cracking open skulls."

Carr's concern is not for workers' skulls, but that such attacks could spark a general movement of the working class. He advanced a so-called five-point peace plan with the same content as Beazley's. He urged Howard to take up the repeated offers of the MUA and ACTU bureaucrats to enforce the productivity and profit requirements of Patrick's and the other major stevedoring company, P&O. Carr added that the talks would be supervised by the Industrial Relations Commission.

These pleas are another sign that the Labor Party and union leaders are doing everything they can to prevent the mobilisation of the working class, thus allowing an historic defeat to be inflicted on the wharfies through negotiations with the MUA. Patrick's chief Chris Corrigan has already indicated the company's bottom line, even if he were legally compelled to reinstate workers: a halving of the work force, the abolition of overtime and penalty rates and unrestricted speed-up.



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