

Australian unions gave green light to waterfront sackings

How the ACTU stopped action by oil workers

Terry Cook
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Fresh information has come to hand revealing that at a top-level meeting on April 3, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) leaders furiously denounced and threatened oil union representatives for announcing that their members had decided to strike if waterside workers were sacked.

There were extraordinary scenes behind closed doors at the special meeting of all affiliated unions, held at the ACTU's Melbourne headquarters, just four days before the mass sackings of 2,000 wharfies. The ACTU leaders vehemently ruled out any industrial action in the oil industry, or by any other sections of workers, in the event that Patrick's Stevedores replaced its work force with scabs.

Earlier, Australian Workers Union (AWU) assistant national secretary Sam Wood had announced that oil industry workers would walk out if the sackings went ahead. Wood's announcement had been overwhelmingly endorsed by union delegates at refineries and other sites.

Immediately after the April 3 meeting, ACTU assistant national secretary Greg Combet told the media that no such action would take place, whether in the oil industry or any other. "The unions are not in dispute with the companies in the oil industry and they are not in dispute with companies in other industries," he said.

This declaration was a virtual green light to Patrick's and the Howard government to proceed with their long-prepared plans, confident that there would be only token opposition by union leaders. At 11pm on April 7, security guards with attack dogs moved onto the wharves, ordering Patrick's workers to leave the sites forthwith.

According to information obtained by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, the special ACTU meeting opened with a tirade by ACTU president Jennie

George, supported by ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty, Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) National Secretary Doug Cameron and other union leaders, against the AWU representatives.

Instead of being congratulated for the militant response of their members, the AWU officials found themselves called a "pack of idiots" and told to sit down and shut up. An enraged Jennie George demanded to know: "What the hell does the AWU think it's up to?" She accused it of "pushing its own agenda."

George warned the AWU delegates to seriously consider the consequences of not toeing the ACTU line. The union could find itself "on the outside" if it continued with the proposed stoppages, she said. Other ACTU leaders condemned the oil delegates' vote as a "rogue action" and told the AWU representatives to "pull your heads in."

One observer said he was staggered by the ferocity of the attack. It was "nothing short of brutal," he said. "I could not believe what was happening. I must say I was absolutely dumbfounded."

While Cameron and the AMWU joined the attack, the other "left" unions did not raise a single objection. Mining union president John Maitland sat in silence.

These scenes are a graphic warning of the lengths to which the union leadership will go to suppress industrial action. If they are prepared use these standover tactics against their own colleagues, what measures will they use against rank and file workers?



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