

Struggle on the Australian docks: The real meaning of the MUA's "victory"

Labor Party and union leaders prepare waterfront betrayal

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Whatever the final outcome of the complex legal manoeuvres in the Federal and High Courts, the so-called "victory" proclaimed by the Maritime Union of Australia is a gross betrayal of waterfront workers and workers around the country who have backed their struggle against the Patrick's mass sackings.

Speaking for the entire union bureaucracy, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Jennie George hailed the Federal Court reinstatement ruling as a confirmation "that the rule of law can protect the interests of ordinary people against the might of corporations and the might of government."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The court decision has two interconnected aims: to hand the MUA leaders a legal "victory" which they can use to sidetrack the growing movement of workers in support of the wharfies, and to further integrate the union into the process of "waterfront reform," which has already seen the destruction of thousands of jobs.

If the Howard government advanced a plan for the 2,000 sacked wharfies to go back to work on the following terms—no wages for weeks, a ban on all industrial action, millions of dollars of union funds to be used to bail out the company, at least half the workers to be terminated—the wharfies, and every other class conscious worker, would reject it out of hand.

Yet these are the conditions that the MUA and ACTU bureaucrats are seeking to impose—and hail as a "victory."

MUA leaders have given an undertaking in the Federal Court that their members will work for the former subsidiaries of Patrick's—owned by the wealthy Lang Corporation—without wages (worth \$2 million a week), for as long as it takes to restore their profits.

They also guaranteed to prevent industrial action and pay tens of millions of dollars to compensate Patrick's, the National Farmers Federation and any other company adversely affected if the case ultimately goes against the union.

Then, in a meeting of the creditors of Patrick's shell companies, they pledged to invest millions of dollars in the businesses and to protect the insolvent firms against workers' compensation and insurance claims.

Under this arrangement, the union's top bureaucrats will effectively join management. One of their first decisions, already foreshadowed by the liquidators, will be to permanently shut as many as 11 of Patrick's 17 terminals, retrenching hundreds of wharfies.

If waterside workers return to work under these conditions at Patrick's, equally sweeping cost-cutting and job-shedding provisions will be demanded immediately at Patrick's rivals—P&O and other stevedoring companies—measures that the MUA has already agreed to negotiate with P&O chairman Richard Hein.

Workers in every other industry will pay a bitter price. Whether or not

they use exactly the same corporate restructuring devices as Patrick's, employers large and small will bring forward similar attacks.

The further decimation of the wharfies will dramatically deepen the offensive against the working class over the past decade and a half. Its impact will be even wider than the previous betrayals inflicted by the ACTU—from the sellout of the sacked SEQEB electricity workers in 1985, to the deregistration of the Builders Labourers Federation in 1986, the defeat of the Robe River workers in 1987, the smashing of the pilots union in 1989, and the betrayal of the APPM paper workers in 1992.

How has this happened?

How have the conditions been created for this result, amid a growing movement in the working class behind the wharfies?

Despite draconian Supreme Court injunctions and several large-scale police attacks in Fremantle, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, thousands of ordinary workers, youth, housewives, pensioners and others have joined the picket lines at wharf terminals around the country, to block the movement of scab-loaded trucks.

But from day one of this dispute, the union bureaucrats, together with their Labor Party colleagues, have sabotaged any independent mobilisation of the working class. Where action has taken place they have tried to limit it.

The central preoccupation of the union leaders has been action in the courts. There they have sought to demonstrate to the government and the stevedoring employers their willingness and capacity to deliver job cuts and speed-up.

Not a day has gone by without the union leaders referring to how they more than halved the work force between 1989 to 1992, in collaboration with the Labor government, and increased container rates by more than 50 per cent.

Why the Federal Court intervened

Justice North's reinstatement ruling, now upheld by the Full Bench of the Federal Court, was a highly political decision aimed at trying to defuse the growing movement of the working class.

As the picket lines swelled last week, splits appeared in ruling circles. Whereas a week earlier, the media had been filled with triumphant

declarations by Howard and Workplace Relations Minister Reith that the waterfront conflict was already over, key sections of the ruling class began to express anxiety about the political situation.

Millionaire merchant banker and Australian Republican Movement head Malcolm Turnbull and the Victorian Chamber of Commerce called for a negotiated settlement. Media commentators raised concerns that the methods used by Patrick's and the Liberals—black-hooded scabs, security guards with dogs, conspiratorial corporate restructuring and sweeping court orders outlawing pickets—were triggering a wider movement.

For the first time since the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975 and the storming of parliament in 1982, fears were publicly expressed about rising class tensions. Labor Party leader Kim Beazley warned that the government was endangering the “unity of the nation” and the “stability of democracy.” The front-page headline of the April 18 weekend edition of the *Australian Financial Review*, the main business newspaper, was: “Out of control: a nation divided.”

These comments reflected concerns that the waterfront war was becoming a focal point for the pent-up anger and resentment felt by millions towards the entire corporate-government assault on the social position of the working class: the destruction of hundreds of thousands of full-time jobs; the reversal of hard-won working conditions; the running down and closure of schools, hospitals, childcare centres, public housing and public transport; and the impoverishment of broad layers of workers and their families.

As North handed down his judgment, hundreds of people continued to defy a Victorian Supreme Court injunction banning anyone from gathering, or even standing, within 200 metres of the Melbourne docks. Later on the same day, state police commissioners met in Melbourne and voiced concern about the escalating conflict, calling for a peaceful resolution.

Cracks were also starting to appear in the ACTU's ban on industrial action. Storemen and packers had held 24-hour stoppages in Victoria and truck drivers had briefly blocked traffic on Melbourne's Footscray Road, one of the city's main port access roads. When police arrested 184 pickets in Brisbane on Tuesday, it provoked a 24-hour transport drivers' stoppage and a rally at the picket on Thursday, as the Full Bench considered its appeal.

But the reinstatement decision, as Corrigan and Reith have been insisting, remains a dead letter because the labour hire companies are insolvent, having been stripped of their assets by Patrick's.

The series of legal proceedings have demonstrated once again that the courts do not exist to administer justice, but to uphold capitalist property rights and corporate profitability.

It is in the very nature of the private profit system that no company can be forced by law to supply capital to employ workers. As Corrigan has bluntly stated, he has not actually sacked anyone, he has simply withdrawn his capital. In so far as a decision, like Justice North's, is made contrary to their interests for political reasons, those wielding economic power rearrange their affairs to nullify it.

A crisis of perspective

Wharfies and class conscious workers everywhere must now ask themselves: how is it that the Labor Party and union bureaucrats have been able to proceed so far in organising this betrayal? And what must be done to prevent yet another major defeat?

In the first place, it is necessary to turn to other sections of workers for support and break the shackles imposed by the ACTU and union bureaucrats.

But such a struggle can only be organised if the program of the MUA leadership and the entire trade union and Labor Party bureaucracy for the “restructuring” of the waterfront is challenged and fought.

The government, the employers, the Labor leaders and the union bureaucrats insist that greater efficiency and productivity is necessary. But greater productivity for whom?

This is a class question. The dividends resulting from greater efficiency on the waterfront are not used to create jobs or build hospitals and schools. They are appropriated by the stevedoring and shipping companies to accumulate profit and add to the wealth of a thin layer of multi-millionaires.

And who are the Corrigan and Reiths of this world to preach the need for efficiency? The private profit system, which they represent, is creating unimaginable waste and inefficiency.

In all the major capitalist countries, the talents, ingenuity and capacities of millions of workers have been laid to waste by unemployment. Young people are more qualified than ever before, but remain either jobless or forced into dead-end and part-time work.

Every worker is for the development of more productive methods. But under the profit system, rising productivity means that more workers are consigned to the scrap heap, while youth face permanent joblessness.

Greater productivity under capitalism means that workers in one country are pitted against their fellow workers internationally in a never-ending race to the bottom as employers demand “global competitiveness.”

Genuine efficiency in production will only be achieved when the working class establishes a workers' government and takes the control of the productive forces out of the hands of the capitalist class, placing the banks, finance houses and other key sectors under social ownership. Only then will it be possible to use modern technology to eliminate backbreaking work, shorten working hours, and develop a more productive, democratically controlled, global economy to uplift the living standards of all.

The waterfront confrontation is not a dispute with a “rogue” employer, but the sharp point of a wider conflict between two irreconcilably opposed forces—labour and capital. Not just Corrigan and Howard, but every company and government worldwide is driven by the escalating demands of global capital to relentlessly step up the exploitation of the working class.

Decisive political issues therefore confront workers, issues that go far beyond replacing one capitalist government by another. An Australian Labor Party government led by Beazley, working in close collaboration with the ACTU chiefs, would not be fundamentally different from the Howard government. In fact, Howard was only able to take office in 1996 after working people turned in disgust from the Laborites. For 13 years the Hawke and Keating Labor governments did the bidding of big business.

The same impasse faces workers around the world. In Britain, the Tories were ousted last year after 18 years, only to produce a Labour regime under Tony Blair who is pursuing a Thatcherite social program even to the right of the Tories, dismantling the welfare system itself. A similar role is being played by the Jospin government in France and the Prodi administration in Italy.

Thus the waterfront conflict underscores the urgent necessity of advancing an alternative perspective to the pro-capitalist politics of the Labor and union bureaucracy. Such a perspective can only be developed through the construction of a genuine socialist party, based on the struggle to eliminate social inequality and unite workers internationally against the profit system.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for this orientation. We urge all workers to open up a discussion on our program and to build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.



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