

Government, employers, bankers collude: Mass sackings on Australian waterfront

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In an unprecedented operation involving the Howard government, major finance houses and big employers, Patrick Stevedoring, Australia's second largest waterfront company, has moved to sack its entire 2,100-strong work force and replace it with scab labour.

Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith announced the mass sackings in the national parliament just after 11 p.m. on Tuesday night. A three-hour meeting of the federal cabinet gave the final go-ahead for the all-out assault on the waterfront workers, a key section of the Australian working class.

Even as Reith spoke, an army of black-uniformed security guards, accompanied by attack dogs, simultaneously moved onto 17 docks around the country, ordering employees to cease work and leave the sites immediately. In a military-style operation, some security squads literally invaded the docks, arriving in boats and sweeping across the wharves with dogs.

The militaristic methods used in the near-midnight raids demonstrate the type of brutal regime that Patrick's, backed to the hilt by the government and powerful sections of the ruling class, seeks to impose on the waterfront. The 2,100 full-time, part-time and casual workers are to be replaced by just 400 strikebreakers, employed by nine different contracting companies.

At the core of the scab force will be 140 straddle crane drivers and other equipment operators trained over the past two months at the National Farmers Federation's (NFF) scab training base on Webb Dock, in the heart of the Port of Melbourne, the country's busiest export terminal.

Not just the government, but top finance, accounting and legal firms, and employers organizations, all participated in months of preparations for the coordinated physical attack on the dock workers.

- The federal cabinet agreed to bankroll the operation to the tune of at least \$250 million, to be used to offer redundancy packages to the sacked workers.

- Reith announced that the government had hired corporate lawyers internationally and would "pour whatever taxpayers' money is necessary" into legal costs to ensure the operation's success.

- To thwart any domestic legal challenge, major accountancy firms moved in as administrators of Patrick's three employing companies, after Patrick's withdrew their operating capital. Technically, this meant that the waterside workers were not sacked by Patrick's, but by its hiring agencies.

- An array of shadowy security firms was organised in advance, as were eight labour-hire contractors, plus the NFF.

- Police in every state, including the Labor-governed state of New South Wales, were mobilised to back the private security guards.

- Advised by top corporate legal firms, the company sent its forces

onto the docks just 11 hours before the Federal Court was due to hear a Maritime Union of Australia application for an injunction to halt the sackings.

After the court subsequently granted a temporary injunction until next Wednesday, Reith declared the union's application to be "worthless," on the grounds that Patrick's had terminated its contracts with its hiring agencies, and not actually sacked its workers. He said the new contractors were proceeding, exactly as planned, to take over the docks, regardless of the court ruling.

Within hours of the overnight operation becoming known, thousands of workers from construction sites and other workplaces downed tools and rallied in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities, only to find officials from the MUA, the Australian Council of Trade Unions and other unions urging them to show "discipline" and go straight back to work.

ACTU President Jennie George, interviewed on national radio, emphasised that the unions would oppose any industrial action. Asked repeatedly by an Australian Broadcasting Corporation reporter what the union movement intended to do, she said action would be confined to protest demonstrations and fundraising for the sacked workers. No action would be allowed to "inconvenience the public," she said—another way of saying that no stoppages would be permitted.

The union bureaucracy's response was typified at a rally in Sydney's Darling Harbour, where MUA official Jim Donovan implored the 4,500 workers in attendance to go back to their jobs and collect funds for the sacked waterside workers. "We do not want any of the type of violence that was demonstrated two years ago in Canberra," he said. "This is our peaceful assembly and we ask you to respect it."

Donovan, a leading member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, was referring to the events of August 1996 when 5,000 workers broke away from an official ACTU rally outside Parliament House, Canberra to storm the parliament building in protest over the Howard government's Workplace Relations Bill. After that eruption, George and other ACTU figures worked hand-in-glove with Australian Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot, now a Labor candidate, to put the finishing touches on the legislation.

Today, the union bureaucracy is cynically using that same legislation to insist that workers cannot take any solidarity industrial action to defend the sacked Patrick's workers, for fear of incurring crippling fines or jail terms.

Many months of high-level planning preceded Patrick's operation. The timing of the move itself was directly related to public statements by ACTU leaders that, in the event of mass sackings, they would prevent industrial action by any section of workers. The plan was

activated just two working days after the ACTU convened a meeting last Friday to rule out any strikes.

The ACTU's declaration virtually rolled out the red carpet for Patrick's and the government to proceed. ACTU Assistant National Secretary Greg Combet rejected threats by the Australian Workers Union leadership, acting under pressure from the rank and file, that oil industry workers would walk out if the sackings went ahead. Combet told the media: "The unions are not in dispute with the companies in the oil industry and they are not in dispute with companies in other industries."

Speaking in parliament on Wednesday, Prime Minister John Howard repeated his statement, first uttered four days earlier, that the waterfront confrontation was a "defining moment" in industrial relations. In other words, the government is intent on smashing the waterside workers—to establish a precedent that will be applied throughout the working class.

In spearheading the waterfront attack, the government is acting on the orders of the bankers and boardroom chiefs who have for months been demanding that the Liberals get on with the task of "waterfront reform," a code word for breaking the collective resistance of maritime workers to new conditions of unlimited speed-up. "We've delivered," Reith declared in announcing the operation in parliament.

With the Asian financial meltdown devastating key export markets of Australian-based mining, agricultural and service companies, the pressure on the government intensified. Howard came under intense business criticism after a failed bid last September to sack the work force on the docks at Cairns, in north Queensland.

The MUA leaders immediately fell into line. Having already collaborated with the former Labor government to drive up output rates and axe 5,000 waterfront jobs between 1989 and 1992, they were anxious to preserve their positions in implementing the employers' agenda.

However, productivity talks between the union and Reith broke down last December, after MUA members in Melbourne rejected an agreement between Patrick's and the union to scrap the existing roster system. The employers and the government increasingly came to the conclusion that the union could not enforce the draconian conditions they required. Reith said a union was needed "that was not only willing to encourage reform but also had the capacity to deliver on reform, which is a bit of a question mark for these guys."

The union was quite willing to meet the employers' demands, including the abolition of all shift and overtime penalties, a work force on call 24 hours a day and a doubling or trebling of productivity rates. But Patrick's and the government lost confidence in the MUA's capacity to force waterside workers to accept these conditions. They concluded that the entire work force would have to be removed, and replaced by newly-trained recruits, employed under individual contracts.

At first the government and those involved in the plans to break the waterfront workers calculated that they would have to establish a strikebreaking training facility offshore, for fear of igniting a social and industrial explosion in Australia. Last December they attempted to set up such a base at Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.

When revelations of military involvement in that exercise led to its abandonment, the plan had to be switched to Melbourne's Webb Dock. That operation has only been able to proceed, for more than two months now, because the MUA and ACTU bureaucrats prevented mass pickets, kept the rest of the waterfront working and opposed any mobilisation of the working class.

Instead, limited strike action was called on individual Patrick's docks in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, with a view to appealing to the company to return to the negotiating table. Only days before the mass sacking plan was activated, Combet wrote an article in the *Australian Financial Review* imploring Patrick's to follow the example of the Sea-Land terminal in Adelaide, where the union had worked closely with management to drive up the container handling rate to the level demanded by Patrick's and the government.

The Adelaide terminal was "characterised by regular management-union discussion—in the workplace—of the profit and loss account and ways of improving business," Combet wrote. Referring to the disruption at Patrick's, he said, "The mess can only be cleaned up with an honest appraisal by all sides. The ACTU and MUA stand ready to negotiate on this basis—but where is Patrick Stevedoring?"

Thus Combet spelt out the readiness of the MUA and ACTU bureaucrats to deliver to the employers the draconian conditions required to make the docks "internationally competitive."

Having prepared the way for the mass sackings, and opposed any struggle against them, the union bureaucrats are seeking to sow two fatal illusions. The first is that the temporary injunction granted by the Federal Court is a "victory" that will defend Patrick's workers' jobs. In reality, as Reith and Howard have stated bluntly, the ruling will not even delay their plans, let alone halt them.

The second deception is that the union bureaucrats of the International Transport Workers Federation will undertake what their Australian colleagues have themselves opposed—concerted industrial action to stop the sackings. Reith and the government have just as confidently dismissed this prospect. As Reith has stated, accurately enough, the defeat of the long-running Liverpool dockers' dispute in Britain proved the ITWF to be a "paper tiger."

Waterside workers, and all workers, need to make a critical assessment of how the employer-government offensive has been able to proceed this far, and begin to formulate an alternative perspective to that of all the union bureaucrats, who fight to subordinate workers to the requirements of corporate profit.

Any struggle to defend the dock workers can only develop independently of, and in opposition to, the union apparatuses that have proved to be barriers to any unified resistance in the working class.



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