

The waterfront war: why is only one side fighting?

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
11 April 1998

The following statement has been issued as a leaflet by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia. Just three days after the Howard government and Patrick's, one of Australia's largest waterfront employers, sacked over 2,000 dock workers, scab contractors are already loading and unloading ships at many of the company's 17 terminals.

All maritime workers and workers everywhere must ask the question: why has there been no mobilisation of the working class to answer the mass sackings of more than 2,000 full-time and part-time waterfront workers?

Why, from the first day of the industrial and political war launched by the Howard government and Patrick's Stevedoring, have the sacked workers been reduced to increasingly impotent protests outside locked gates?

Why is cargo still flowing in every Australian port—even while hundreds of scabs are already loading and unloading ships in Patrick's terminals around the country? Why are seamen manning these ships and why are the P&O workers still on the job?

Why have the oil workers, the coal miners and every other section of the labour movement been stopped from taking action? Why aren't maritime workers sending teams to factories and working class areas to expose the lies told about wharfies' conditions and to organise support action?

Speaking on ABC radio on Thursday morning, just one day after the mass sackings, Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith declared: "One of the remarkable events of yesterday was that cargo flowed in every port. The MUA (Maritime Union of Australia) failed to shut down the country."

In fact, the government and Patrick's only moved because they had made a sober assessment, based on long experience, that the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) and MUA leaders would prevent mass action.

The ACTU literally rolled out the red carpet for the mass sackings. On Friday April 3, a top-level ACTU meeting ruled out any industrial action by oil workers, or anyone else. Just two working days later, a three-hour meeting of the federal cabinet gave the final go-ahead for Patrick's operation.

Patrick's boss Chris Corrigan and the financiers he represents are now proceeding with their operation confident that the Labor Party and union movement will do everything in their power to muzzle, intimidate and sabotage any opposition by rank-and-file workers.

As Rupert Murdoch's commentator Alan Wood wrote on the front page of the *Australian* on Thursday: "Another telling thing about yesterday is something that didn't happen—contrary to earlier threats by Bill Kelty and others, there has been no national strike called and for all their bluster, neither the Labor Party nor the ACTU want one."

What have workers been told?

On picket lines, union officials have told workers they have a "plan." But this same plan has already allowed the Dubai scab-training base to be shifted to Webb Dock. For two months, the unions restricted workers to a "peaceful assembly" outside the dock, while Patrick's openly prepared its operation inside.

What is the union's "plan?" It involves (1) suppressing industrial action, (2) isolating the sacked Patrick's workers and (3) proving to the employers, including P&O, that the MUA can still deliver the productivity demands of big business, as it has done for two decades.

All the various "strategies" and "tactics" put forward by the MUA and ACTU chiefs to justify their role have already proven to be a cruel deception.

First, they claimed that a temporary injunction granted by the Federal Court—or perhaps some further legal action against the government—would defend Patrick's workers' jobs.

In reality, the union leaders knew—and have now admitted—that Patrick's had organised its corporate structure to render any legal challenge worthless.

Even if Patrick's had not liquidated its employing companies, the final outcome would have been no different. The courts do not exist to defend workers' jobs, but to protect corporate property rights.

In countless mass sackings, from the SEQEB electricity workers in 1985, to the Visyboard and Kellogg's workers in recent years, not a single worker has actually been reinstated through the courts.

Instead, in every case, the union bureaucrats have used legal appeals—all the way to the High Court in some cases—to block all demands from workers for industrial action.

Second, the union leaders insisted that the International Transport Federation would shut down Patrick's operations.

But ship owners are now utilising Patrick's scab terminals, not the least concerned about the ITF. As every maritime worker knows, the ITF allows the most shocking sweatshop conditions on ships and in ports around the world. It has presided over defeat after defeat internationally, including the smashing of conditions on the New Zealand docks in the early 1990s.

Only two months ago, the sacked Liverpool dockers in Britain were forced to end their 18-month struggle for reinstatement. Their fight was deliberately sabotaged and isolated by their union, with the ITF's active collaboration. That is why Reith has publicly dismissed the ITF as a "paper tiger."

Third, the ACTU has declared it will establish a "Fighting Fund" to sustain the sacked workers. Exactly the same device was used to shut down general strike action to back the SEQEB workers and to prevent stoppages to defend the locked-out APPM paper workers in 1992.

In both cases, workers were left to rot on picket lines for weeks—more than a year in the SEQEB dispute—and eventually forced to accept defeat. The end came for the SEQEB workers and their families when the ACTU cut off their funds.

A similar, but even greater, betrayal is now being prepared. That is the real meaning of MUA National Secretary John Coombs's latest statement that the longer the dispute goes on, the better.

Every union official has maintained that the Howard government's Workplace Relations Act gives them no choice, except to prevent strikes. Their real fear is not that fines will cripple the unions, but that if the government tried to use the Act, it could trigger a wider conflict, even a general strike.

MUA official Jim Donovan, a leading member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, blurted out these concerns when he addressed 4,500 protesting workers at Sydney's Darling Harbour. He demanded there be no repeat of the events of August 1996, when 5,000 workers broke away from an ACTU rally to storm Parliament House in Canberra.

Following that eruption, ACTU President Jennie George worked hand-in-glove with the then Australian Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot, now a Labor candidate, to help Reith draft the final version of his Act.

The unions' program

In fact, the unions have no opposition to Patrick's new working conditions. They agree totally with "global competitiveness." As Coombs and Co. never tire of repeating, they are committed to meeting productivity "benchmarks"—so long as the government and the employers retain their services.

Essentially, this involves pitting Australian workers against their fellow workers worldwide in the drive to boost corporate profit. Every new "benchmark" intensifies the rate of exploitation of workers internationally.

Those workers inclined to think that the concessions made by the unions have been necessary or, at least, inevitable, to somehow "save jobs," need to stop and think. There is literally no limit to this endless cycle of cost-cutting.

Why has every union, including the CFMEU and the AMWU, joined in blocking any struggle against the Patrick's onslaught? Because they have all collaborated in this nationalist and reactionary program since the early 1980s, particularly under Hawke and Keating.

As every big business editorial writer has been quick to point out, the ACTU and Labor Party leaders can hardly oppose the crushing of the waterside workers when they did the same to the builders labourers and the pilots in the 1980s—in pursuit of the same basic agenda.

The MUA and other "left" unions backed the Labor government all the way in smashing the BLF and the pilots' union, even as the Labor Party leaders sent in the air force to break the pilots' strike and financially bailed out the airlines as they recruited scabs on a global scale. The MUA denounced the pilots as "fat cats" for fighting for a wage rise, the very same epithet now hurled against wharfies by the media hacks.

These operations were mounted to demonstrate that the Labor Party and unions would tolerate absolutely no challenge to the destruction of workers' conditions, basic rights and living standards under the Accord, whether it be union rights and safety on building sites or the very right to strike for higher pay. The ACTU made it clear it would go to any lengths to discipline and regiment any section of the working class, no matter what the cost in terms of workers' jobs and livelihoods.

At the same time, between 1989 and 1992, the MUA and the ACTU worked with the Labor government and the employers to eliminate more than 5,000 waterside jobs—half the then work force—through the so-called Waterfront Industrial Reform Agreement.

The MUA has sought to maintain this job-cutting partnership with

Patrick's and the Howard government. However, productivity talks between the union and Reith broke down last December, after MUA members in Melbourne initially rejected an agreement to scrap the existing roster system.

Reith and Corrigan's backers increasingly came to the conclusion that the union leaders, although willing, could not quickly enough enforce the draconian conditions they required. Reith said a union was needed that "had the capacity to deliver."

What is at stake?

The treacherous role of the Labor Party and union leaders is underlined by what is at stake in this dispute, for the Australian and international working class.

For generations, Australian wharfies and seamen have been seen by workers throughout industry and around the world as a key contingent of the labour movement.

Now Howard has been able to crow in national parliament that Patrick's success in bringing in scab labour is a "defining moment" in industrial relations. Editorial writers speak of turning back conditions won in 100 years of class struggle.

The militaristic methods used by Patrick's demonstrate the type of brutal regime that employers seek to impose everywhere. More than 2,000 workers are to be replaced by just 400 contract employees. They will be required to work under individual contracts, on call 24 hours a day, with no overtime or penalty allowances.

If this assault succeeds, workers in every other industry, where employers have already destroyed many basic conditions, will face an even more vicious onslaught. Maritime workers worldwide, from Indonesia to Japan and the US, will confront new attacks.

A new road required

The record demonstrates that there can be no doubt whatsoever that the unions will collaborate in enforcing the new regime. After keeping the P&O docks running throughout the dispute, the MUA will shortly be called to meetings with P&O, whose chairman, Richard Hein, has immediately foreshadowed cuts in costs to match those at Patrick's.

And having allowed Patrick's to set up its new company structure, establish the Webb Dock base and unleash its mass sackings, the MUA will soon be back in talks with Corrigan.

Corrigan has indicated his willingness to recruit MUA members back to Patrick's, so long as so-called "troublemakers"—workers who will not accept the unrestricted demolition of jobs, conditions and safety—are excluded.

Waterside workers, and all workers, need to make a critical assessment of how this employer-government offensive has been possible.

Over the past two decades, under the leadership of the trade unions, workers have faced one disaster after another. This is because the unions' program amounts to subordinating the interests of workers, not only in Australia but worldwide, to the ever more ruthless requirements of corporate profit.

A struggle to defend the wharfies can therefore only develop outside, and independently of, the union apparatus. This requires an alternative, socialist, perspective—one based on the necessity for the international unity of workers and the far-reaching transformation of society in the

interests of working people, the vast majority, not private profit.

We urge all maritime workers and their supporters to open up a discussion with the Socialist Equality Party on this perspective. Defy the attempts of union bureaucrats to ban such a dialogue, and circulate this leaflet as widely as possible.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact