

The Australian waterfront conflict

How Labor's privatisation handed docks to Patrick's

Mike Head
7 May 1998

One revealing historical feature of the conflict generated by Patrick's Stevedores' mass sacking of Australian waterfront workers has barely been mentioned by the media, and certainly not by the union leaders.

Back in 1994 the previous Labor Party government of Paul Keating set the scene for the mass sackings when it privatised the Australian National Line (ANL) — the government-owned shipping line — and sold off ANL's 25 percent share in Australian Stevedores to Jamison Equity, headed by Chris Corrigan.

Having assumed sole control over the stevedoring company, Jamison Equity was subsequently taken over by Lang Corporation, and Australian Stevedores became Patrick's Stevedores, still managed by Corrigan.

The Labor government's 1994 decision sparked a five-day national maritime strike, involving both waterside workers and seamen, that shut all ports and stopped all coastal shipping. The stoppage was ended by an agreement between the Keating government, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Under the deal, reached with Keating and his Industrial Relations Minister Laurie Brereton, the MUA agreed to the ANL privatisation, on the condition that the union could attempt to pull together a business consortium to purchase the ANL shipping line, with itself as the majority shareholder.

In other words, the union sought to become a major maritime employer and owner of capital, with a direct material interest in driving up the rate of exploitation of its own members.

Led by MUA national secretary John Coombs, the

MUA bureaucrats did not oppose the sale of the remainder of Australian Stevedores to Corrigan. Instead they tried to go into business alongside him, as the purchasers of ANL.

Using superannuation funds and cash solicited from maritime workers, the union attempted to organise a consortium with another shipping company and a trucking company, thought to be Linfox, headed by Lindsay Fox, a strike-breaking employer and personal friend of ACTU secretary Bill Kelty.

Central to the 1994 agreement was a pledge by the MUA to further cut ship crew sizes, which had already been reduced by almost half since 1986, to one of the lowest levels in the world. In addition, there was a no-strike accord and cuts in holiday provisions, training costs and real wage levels.

The deal also included a \$28 million annual subsidy to Australian ship owners. They were allowed to pocket the income tax payable by seamen and receive generous new depreciation allowances.

On the docks, the MUA had earlier in 1994 sold out a national strike over Corrigan's sacking of 55 wharfies, including union delegates, at Sydney's Port Botany terminal. The stoppage was isolated to Sydney and then settled on the basis that the 55 jobs could be destroyed, as long as the company found "volunteers".

In the course of that dispute, the union emphasised its commitment to "waterfront reform". It accused Corrigan of endangering the cooperative process of achieving jobs cuts reliably through the union. In a leaflet, the union boasted of assisting the Labor government and the stevedoring employers to slash the national workforce from 8,872 to 3,818 — a 57 percent reduction — between 1989 and 1992.

Today, the MUA is seeking to repeat that betrayal on a far wider scale, by organising the elimination of hundreds more jobs from Patrick's, under the terms of the reinstatement orders agreed to in the High Court. At the same time, the MUA and ACTU leaders are urging workers to return a Labor government — one that would only deepen the attacks carried out by the last Labor administration.



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