

Bipartisan line-up against Australian dock workers

Documents reveal Labor's waterfront conspiracy

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In its now adjourned 'unlawful conspiracy' case against the federal government and Patrick Stevedoring, the Maritime Union of Australia inadvertently opened up a Pandora's box when it obtained a Federal Court order for the release of all relevant official documents.

The conspiracy case, soon to be abandoned by the union as part of a job-cutting agreement, alleged that Patrick's and the Howard government conspired to breach the government's own Workplace Relations Act by sacking 1,400 workers on April 7 for being members of a union and taking lawful industrial action.

Because the MUA did not specify any cut-off date for the information it was seeking on the federal government's involvement in 'waterfront reform,' a mountain of documents emerged containing damning information concerning the activity of the previous Keating Labor government.

The 15,000 to 20,000 pages of material contain evidence that the Labor government undertook extensive preparations in September 1994 for an operation against waterfront workers which differed little from that carried out by the Howard government.

Like its Liberal counterpart, the Labor government received corporate legal advice to devise a strategy to drive through the sweeping changes -- job cuts, the abolition of overtime and shift penalties and increased flexibility -- now being imposed on the wharves.

While the present Labor leader Kim Beazley and his party colleagues condemned the Howard government for its direct involvement in the recent dispute and feigned horror at the methods used, the released documents show the Liberals did nothing that had not been previously considered by the Laborites.

The 'options' under consideration in 1994 included standing down entire waterfront workforces, cancelling union awards and agreements and deregistering the MUA. Labor was prepared to use secondary boycott laws to break strikes and to take legal action against maritime workers and the MUA under the Crimes Act for interference in international trade.

Like the Liberals, the Labor government set up a high-level Cabinet subcommittee to implement its strategy. It included Prime Minister Paul Keating, Industrial Relations Minister Laurie Brereton, Treasurer Ralph Willis and present opposition leader Kim Beazley.

Throughout the recent dispute Beazley boasted that Labor had delivered two-thirds of the 'waterfront reform' required by corporate Australia between 1989 and 1992 when it slashed full-time jobs from over 10,000 to 5,500. He made it clear that had the Keating government remained in office it would have delivered the remaining one-third of the agenda. The documents show the lengths Labor would have gone to go to achieve its aim.

Earlier in 1994, the government had introduced its new Industrial Relations Reform Act, enshrining the right of employers to negotiate individual work contracts outside unions.

The Act outlawed strikes except when a new enterprise agreement was being negotiated and imposed fines of up to \$5,000 per day on illegal strikes. It also preserved existing anti-strike laws, Sections 45D and 45E of the Trade Practices Act, outlawing solidarity action.

A concerted attack was mounted on waterfront workers that year, beginning in March when Australian Stevedoring -- now Patrick Stevedoring -- sacked 55

workers at its Port Botany (Sydney) facility, including 21 union delegates, and then stood down its entire workforce.

In August, Keating and Brereton backed an attempt by stevedoring company Freeport Maintenance to use the Act to impose non-union agreements on workers at Fremantle in Western Australia.

By September, the government moved to privatise the Australian National Line (ANL) and to sell ANL's 25 percent share in Australian Stevedoring.

Just as the Keating cabinet subcommittee finalised its plans, the MUA called off a five-day national maritime strike and agreed to the privatisation. The union endeavoured to cobble together a consortium involving business, the MUA and union superannuation funds to buy the shipping line. Although the bid failed, the privatisation went ahead nevertheless.

In addition, the union agreed to impose further restructuring in the fully-privatised Australian Stevedoring. The company became totally owned by Jamison Equity, headed by Chris Corrigan, now Patrick's chief executive.

At the same time an agreement was struck with the ship owners to reduce crew sizes -- already the lowest internationally -- cut holiday entitlements, training costs and rates of pay and set up a no-strike accord with the employers.

The 1994 documents demonstrate that had a Labor government been returned to office in 1996 it would have deepened its assault on the waterfront and would not have hesitated to utilise the same methods as the Howard government.

The union leadership must have known that Labor was involved in such extensive preparations in 1994. Yet nothing was done to alert waterside workers or other sections of the working class. By suppressing this information, the MUA strengthened the hand of the Howard government and assisted its preparations against maritime workers.

The latest revelations may have been a factor in the MUA's decision to drop the conspiracy action as part of the dispute settlement. One thing is certain -- the deal has politically shielded the Labor leaders, as well as the government. Equally, there is no doubt that the Labor leaders fully support the settlement, that delivers all the requirements of the employers and the Howard government.

The MUA has agreed to the elimination of the jobs of 626 of its members, out of 1,315, and 75 non-members' jobs. It will enforce the outsourcing of non-core work and greater 'flexibility' to drive up container handling rates to 25 per hour -- the exact number specified by the company and the government.

Corrigan has crowed that the deal will boost Patrick's profits by \$30-40 million a year, recovering its losses from the dispute within 12 months. Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith has expressed his satisfaction with the outcome, declaring that the waterfront will never be the same again.

The entire affair underscores the political impasse confronting the working class. Its old leaderships -- Labor and the unions -- are totally committed to enforcing the profit requirements of big business. Workers need a new mass party based on a perspective that challenges the dictates of the capitalist market and advances a socialist alternative.

See Also:

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