

Why all are silent on the waterfront deal

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This week almost half the workforce at Patrick Stevedoring was retrenched. The sackings were part of a deal ratified last week in the Federal Court, finally delivering to Patrick's and the Howard government the cuts to jobs and working conditions they demanded when the company sacked its entire 1,400-strong workforce on April 7.

Over the past couple of months the Maritime Union of Australia and the company have been locked in behind-the-scene talks, thrashing out the details of the agreement. What is the outcome?

- The destruction of 626 jobs and cuts to over 100 working conditions, including overtime and penalty rates.

- Crane rates to be increased from 18 containers to 25 per hour, in line with the target set by the government.

The first 440 sacked workers and 70 supervisors left last Sunday and the others will shortly follow.

The MUA also agreed to impose a no-strike agreement on its members at Patrick's, excluding them from taking solidarity strike action for two years.

To consummate the deal the MUA ditched its illegal conspiracy case. The union's case charged that the government and Patrick's had conspired to break the workplace relations and anti-discrimination laws by sacking the workers for being union members.

In return, the government's Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC) dropped its legal action against the MUA for allegedly breaching the secondary boycott laws during the month-long waterfront lockout.

Patrick's chief executive Chris Corrigan underscored the value of the deal to both the company and the government by providing \$7.5 million to meet the ACCC's demand for damages to be paid to other businesses that supposedly suffered losses during the dispute.

Yet the extraordinary Patrick-MUA agreement received scanty reportage in the media and has not rated even a passing mention by either the Prime Minister John Howard or Opposition leader Kim Beazley in the course

of the election campaign. In last weekend's televised leadership debate neither leader referred to the deal or the past explosive events on the wharves. In fact, not a word was said about industrial relations at all.

The Labor Party and the unions have buried the issue, even as more damaging evidence has emerged of the intimate and high level involvement of senior government officials, including Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith, in hatching an unlawful conspiracy against the waterfront workers.

A recent four-part series in the *Australian Financial Review* shows that Reith was present at a meeting last year when Corrigan discussed plans to sack the workforce and train a scab force overseas. Yet on December 3, Reith denied in parliament any knowledge of the training operation established in Dubai.

The silence on all sides is in sharp contrast to the situation only a few short months ago when the waterfront dispute dominated official political debate. Parliament was the scene of noisy recriminations hurled from both sides of the house.

Howard claimed that 'waterfront reform' was the number one issue facing the country and that industrial relations would be central to the government's election strategy. Beazley decried the government's military-style operation while agreeing with the need to restructure the waterfront. He vowed to make it an election issue.

Every day the media was filled with images of hooded security guards, armed with batons and attack dogs, patrolling the docks as busloads of scabs, trained by the National Farmers Federation, were shepherded through pickets.

Now it is as though this operation--involving the highest levels of government, Patrick's leading directors, major banks, the NFF, the military, private para-military organisations and a host of shady characters--never happened.

There is a tacit agreement between all those involved--the Liberals, Labor, the employers, the unions and the media--to draw a veil of silence over the events.

How is one to explain this remarkable development?

Silence on the waterfront issue is of course in line with the general decision by both big business parties to keep the real issues facing workers out of the election and to ensure that neither their policies nor past record is subjected to a critical examination.

When Howard and Reith unleashed their assault on waterfront workers in April they had expected to gain a swift and easy victory. They had calculated correctly that the MUA bureaucracy and the ACTU would attempt to shackle workers' opposition, block widespread industrial action and attempt to come to some arrangement.

The government was also confident that its vicious campaign to vilify waterside workers as 'overpaid bludgers' would isolate the sacked workers from gaining the support of other sections of the working class. With a victory under its belt the government would have made 'waterfront and industrial reform' central in a snap early election.

The entire strategy began to go amiss almost immediately. Thousands of working people demonstrated their sympathy with the sacked workers and their opposition to the government's assault by joining picket lines.

Sections of the employers, especially those most directly affected by the continued disruption of exports and imports, began to express reservations about the resulting stalemate and feared that revelations the government had broken its own industrial relations laws would compromise its ability to drive through further cuts on the waterfront.

When the operation became further bogged down in court actions and began to unravel, the Federal Court intervened to order reinstatement, clear up the legal mess and salvage the situation for the government and the employers.

The issue was then dragged out of the limelight and assigned to the backrooms so that a deal could be hatched with the unions. The MUA leaders are silent today because they achieved their aim--to maintain the role of the union in overseeing 'waterfront reform'. This perspective was encapsulated in the slogan: 'The MUA--here to stay.'

Why not a word from the Labor Party? Its leading spokesmen fell silent on the waterfront issue in early July. It was then that federal government documents came to light revealing that in September 1994 the Keating Labor government had undertaken extensive preparations to carry out equally brutal cuts on the wharves using similar

measures to those employed by Howard and Reith.

Like their Liberal counterparts, Labor had set up a committee staffed by high-ranking ministers, including Keating and Beazley, to direct the operation. Their plan was to stand down the entire waterfront workforce, cancel union awards and agreements and deregister the MUA.

As well, Labor was prepared to use secondary boycott laws to break strikes and to take legal action against waterfront workers under the Crimes Act for interference with international trade.

Given this, the Labor leaders can ill afford to point an accusing figure at Howard and Reith for fear of bringing their own rotten past under scrutiny. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.

On the issue of so-called industrial relations, as on every other question, there is no fundamental difference between the program and policies of either party. They are both dedicated to defending the profit system at the expense of the working class and will not shrink from using the most ruthless methods to achieve that end.

No matter which party forms the next government, Liberal or Labor, it will deepen the attacks on jobs and working conditions in line with the dictates of big business. The waterfront deal will be a benchmark to be imposed everywhere. Already Reith has urged the country's other major stevedoring employer, P&O, to push ahead to gain the same cuts by December.

What, then, of the 'victory' proclaimed by the ACTU and union leaders?

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