

Australian waterfront workers object to new conditions

Terry Cook
21 October 1998

Workers employed at the Patrick Stevedoring cargo handling terminal at Port Botany in Sydney have refused to work under some of the new working conditions in the 'peace' agreement negotiated by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) leadership earlier this year.

The agreement was pushed through membership meetings at the beginning of July, bringing to an end the national waterfront dispute that erupted on April 7 when the company sacked all its 1,400 workers and replaced them with scabs.

The assault on the Patrick workers was organised at the highest levels of the Howard government in order to impose sweeping changes to working conditions in line with business demands for 'waterfront reform'. However it became a political and legal morass for the government. Pickets by waterside workers, other workers and their supporters stalled the operation and it then emerged that the government had breached its own industrial legislation.

To salvage the situation for the government and the employers, the Federal and High Courts ordered the reinstatement of the workers so that talks could proceed with the MUA and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) about how to deliver sweeping cuts to jobs and conditions. The final deal involved the loss of 626 jobs--almost half the workforce-- and the destruction of over 100 working conditions, including overtime and other shift penalty rates. The new regime included extended shifts, the outsourcing of maintenance and other non-core work and a two-year no-strike agreement.

The MUA also pledged to police an increase in crane lifting rates from 18 to 25 containers an hour in line with the benchmark set by the government. This is now being imposed at Patrick's East Swanson Dock in

Melbourne but crane rates at Botany reportedly fell as workers began to resist the demands of the management.

Last week Patrick's management blamed the MUA's Central NSW branch secretary Jim Donovan and union organiser Glen Wood, saying they had breached an undertaking given by MUA national secretary John Coombs to 'accept work changes in good faith'.

The company claimed that the NSW union officials had instructed Botany workers not to work 12-hour shifts or public holidays and not to operate machinery with reduced manning. The company has applied to the Industrial Relations Commission to revoke Wood's permit to enter the worksite to confer with his members.

Donovan, a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), the former Moscow-line Stalinists, is now attempting to distance himself for responsibility for some aspects of the agreement. He has accused the national MUA leadership of a 'lack of communication,' saying problems have arisen because the NSW branch was not involved in negotiations on the agreement.

Last week Donovan told the media: 'We weren't told there were going to be 12-hour shifts in the agreement.' This is far from the truth. The entire MUA leadership knew in detail the conditions of the deal and fought for its acceptance.

In fact, together with the NSW branch leadership, Donovan was instrumental in ensuring that the agreement was accepted at the Sydney membership meeting. The NSW officials harangued workers for hours, insisting they had no choice but to accept the agreement because there was no other option. At the Port of Melbourne, over one third of Patrick's workers rejected the agreement.

After the Sydney meeting Donovan told supporters

that he had recommended the deal as 'acceptable if not totally satisfactory'. This was the line pursued in the July 1 issue of the *Guardian*, the CPA journal, which heralded the deal as a 'victory' though 'not without its costs'.

The same *Guardian* article reported the changes to shifts, commenting that the agreement allowed Patrick's to extend a shift by one, two or four hours a day on an evening shift, or two hours on a night shift. 'There is an absolute maximum of 12 hours work a day,' it said.

It further reported that the agreement included a clause that 'the union and employers also undertake to guarantee supply of labour at all time [including overtime, extensions and all holidays.]' This makes a mockery of any claim by the NSW MUA leadership that it was unaware of the contents of the deal.

Meanwhile, other damning evidence has emerged of the destruction of waterfront conditions agreed to by the MUA. The deal allowed Patrick to outsource maintenance and other work to the contracting company Fluor Daniel. The union assured those retrenched that they could apply for the jobs with the contractor, without losing pay or conditions.

Now the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union and Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union, both hoping to gain coverage of the displaced 115 maintenance workers, say the agreement has allowed Fluor Daniel to cut wages by up to \$16,000 a year. The MUA agreed to the wage cut in the Industrial Relations Commission without even calling a membership meeting.

However, like Donovan, these unions can hardly claim they did not agree with the MUA betrayal. The entire trade union bureaucracy, from the ACTU down, worked to contain workers' opposition to the attack on the wharfies and then hailed the agreement struck by the MUA as an historic victory for the trade union movement.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact