

Australian waterfront workers face further job cuts

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21 January 1999

Australia's largest stevedoring company, P & O Ports, is demanding the elimination of 520 jobs from its 1,300-strong national workforce, together with sweeping changes in working conditions. According to union officials the job cuts at the company's Sydney terminal at Port Botany, the second biggest in the country, will far exceed 40 percent.

Under P & O's new regime, workers would work an extra seven hours per week, plus more weekend and shift work. The changes could reduce take-home-pay by up to 20 percent.

An "in principle agreement" has already been signed by the national leadership of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and is currently being discussed by the executives of the union's state branches.

If the P & O cuts are accepted, manning levels on the country's wharves will have been slashed from 10,000 at the beginning of the 1980s to less than 1,500. Over 6,500 jobs were axed under the Hawke Labor government.

In a front-page article last week the *Australian* newspaper claimed that the severity of the cuts sought by P & O would put the company on "a collision course with the militant Maritime Union of Australia officials who have warned of industrial action".

However, P&O's proposals will not come as a surprise to anyone, least of all the MUA officials.

The cuts demanded by P & O flow directly from the benchmark agreement struck by the MUA with Patrick Stevedoring last July, ending the protracted national waterfront dispute over the company's dismissal of its 1,400 workers.

After burying the dispute in an endless series of court actions, the MUA eventually struck a deal with Patrick's involving the loss of 626 jobs and more than 100 working conditions, including overtime and

penalty rates, and the outsourcing of maintenance and other non-core work. Crane lifting rates were to be increased from 18 to 25 per hour in line with the target set by the Howard Liberal government.

Even before the ink was dry on the agreement, P & O's managing director Richard Hein announced that he expected the MUA to deliver the same cuts, if not more, than those achieved at Patrick's.

By all accounts the MUA bureaucrats are living up to Hein's expectations. Not only has the national leadership endorsed the company's proposals but P & O claims that it has already received "a positive response" from union officials in Melbourne. Negotiations are also underway in Brisbane and Fremantle.

While the Sydney branch officials, led by Jim Donovan, a leading member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, have publicly attacked the draft agreement as "abominable," one does not have to look far to find the source of their concerns.

The drastic reduction in the number of waterfront workers is beginning to undermine the dues base of the union. If the cuts continue, up to 10 union officials could lose their jobs.

The scramble for positions, and the lucrative benefits that go with them, is the real basis of the differences that have arisen over the past two months between the Sydney branch leadership and the national officials.

To rally the support of waterfront workers in the ensuing fight Donovan and his followers are attempting to distance themselves from the MUA betrayal at Patrick's and the deal it produced.

Over the past two months they have been making militant noises and pulling stunts. In December Sydney officials banned 12-hour shifts at Patrick's Port Botany terminal and objected to working on public holidays, claiming that they were not told of these provisions last

year's agreement.

The truth is that Sydney officials were fully aware of the contents of the MUA-Patrick's agreement. They played the crucial role in pushing it through against considerable opposition at Sydney membership meetings last year.

As well, the entire Sydney leadership worked in conjunction with the national officials to isolate the dispute and ensure that other workers, including those at P&O, did not strike in support of their brothers at Patrick's.

And now, for all its militant gesturing, the Sydney branch executive is continuing discussions with P & O to find a way to meet its requirements, a development publicly welcomed by the company.



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