

Maritime Union of Australia determined to impose job cuts

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The Maritime Union of Australia is stepping up its efforts to push through a new job-cutting agreement on the waterfront after failing to ram it through a marathon membership meeting at the P&O Ports West Swanson container terminal in Melbourne.

Despite eight hours of browbeating by union officials, more than 60 percent of the West Swanson workers voted to reject the agreement, which will axe another 600 jobs from docks nationally and destroy a raft of working conditions. Over 500 jobs will be lost at P&O, the nation's largest stevedoring company. The remainder will be cut from four smaller operations, including Newcastle Shipping and Stevedoring.

The agreement rejected at West Swanson would have abolished 101 jobs, or one-third of the facility's 303-strong workforce, introduced annualised salaries to cut overtime and other penalty rates, and outsourced work normally performed by MUA members.

The West Swanson workers warned that the proposed reduction in manning on heavy port equipment, in particular the huge straddle cranes, would undermine safety. The number of operators per crane will be cut from two to one.

Shaken by the show of defiance and fearing that it would spark opposition to the deal in other ports, the MUA leaders called union officials to a meeting on Monday to draw up plans to isolate the West Swanson workers. MUA industrial official Mick O'Leary told the media that the "West Swanson result means the union will be reconsidering its whole approach to negotiations". The MUA would "deal" with the rejection at West Swanson "over the coming weeks".

To assist the union leadership to secure agreement in other ports, the federal government has extended the deadline for the \$350 million fund it established last year to pay for hundreds of redundancies. The deadline

was due to expire only days after the West Swanson meeting.

The union used the fund to persuade workers to take redundancy and to force through the destruction of over 800 jobs at Patrick Stevedoring last year, following a protracted nationwide dispute.

Over the past week the MUA has hammered through the new agreement at the P&O's Brisbane container terminal in Queensland, its bulk and general facility in Melbourne, and at the Port of Fremantle in West Australia.

The MUA leadership is claiming that the deal has "locked in permanent jobs" and is an improvement on the agreement it struck with Patrick Stevedoring last year to axe 625 jobs and allow the increased use of casual labour.

The truth is that under the agreement P&O will cut 450 full-time positions, or one-third of the permanent workforce, and replace them with 350 permanent part-time workers who will be paid \$30,000 a year, way below the take-home pay earned by waterfront workers in the past.

Hundreds of casual workers will be dropped from the company payroll all together, while others will be guaranteed only 14 hours work a week. P&O's managing director Richard Hein said the deal gave the company "the flexibility that it wants".

Workers in Sydney are yet to vote. Their union leaders said they would oppose the P&O agreement at Port Botany but there is little chance they will launch any serious challenge to the national leadership.

Only a few weeks ago the state branch leadership struck a deal with Patrick's stevedoring in the Port of Newcastle that further undermined workers' rights.

In exchange for the reinstatement of six workers, the union signed a no-strike agreement. The workers had

been sacked after they followed a union directive not to load a ship in the course of a demarcation dispute. They will receive no compensation for the time they were stood down and the casual workers sacked at the same time will not be re-employed.

If the MUA is successful in imposing the job losses at P&O the union will have overseen the destruction of 1,500 jobs in just over 12 months, slashing the full-time national waterfront workforce to little more than 2,000.

Last year, after Patrick Stevedoring sacked its 1,427-strong workforce, the MUA leadership conducted the ensuing dispute under the banner “MUA here to stay”. The developments since, both at Patrick and P&O, confirm that this slogan had nothing to do with the defence of jobs or workers' rights.



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