

Australian tycoon uses police and helicopters against Visy Board strikers

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One of Australia's wealthiest tycoons, Richard Pratt, has used helicopters, security guards, police and the courts against workers fighting to defend their basic rights and conditions at Visy Board factories in Sydney over the past two weeks. Pratt's packaging empire has boosted his personal fortune to an estimated \$2.4 billion, but his company pays production workers a flat rate of only about \$500 a week, before tax, effectively forcing them to work long overtime hours.

The 400 workers at Visy's two cardboard and box-making factories in Sydney's western suburbs—at Smithfield and Warwick Farm—have been out on strike since management provocatively suspended two forklift drivers at Warwick Farm for imposing union bans. The strikers voted unanimously at a combined mass meeting yesterday to stay on strike, despite a return to work order issued by the Industrial Relations Commission last Friday. The strikers are demanding the full reinstatement of all workers, including three sacked for participating in picket lines.

The dispute erupted during month-long negotiations over an enterprise agreement between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Visy management. Visy is demanding a range of trade-offs—such as forced work on public holidays, the cashing out of annual leave and long service leave, and changes to working hours to reduce overtime and make way for a third shift—in exchange for an 8 percent pay rise over two years.

Some workers would lose hundreds of dollars per week under these conditions. Workers rejected the demands and maintained their bid for a badly-needed 16 percent rise. They imposed bans on the transportation of “flat-board” boxes, only to have the company stand down the forklift drivers for implementing the bans.

Striking Visy workers outside the Smithfield plant told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters of the methods being used by Visy management to break the strike. For what may be the first time in an Australian industrial dispute, Pratt's company used a helicopter to ferry scabs and their supplies, including beer, across the picket line. After flying the chopper into the plant some 20 times, authorities declared its use illegal because the factory has no helipad.

Up to 60 police had attended every day in the early part of the strike to escort trucks and scab buses across through pickets, while hundreds of strikers jeered and chanted. Police physically pulled workers off trucks and arrested one striker. Other workers who formed lines in front of the trucks were told they would be thrown into police vans if they did not stand clear.

At the Warwick Farm site scabs were illegally transported on the back of a truck, and one scab truck had no registration plates, yet the police still ensured their passage to and from the plant. Police with video cameras filmed workers, providing evidence for Visy, which later named 48 workers and union officials as defendants in obtaining a Supreme Court order outlawing any hindrance of movement in or out of the factories.

Three workers have been sacked for supposed picket line conduct, another eight are thought to be on a dismissal list and all the named “defendants” may receive the same treatment.

Strikers on the picket line condemned Pratt for spending tens of thousands of dollars on flying scabs into the plant via helicopter while seeking to strip their conditions. “If he's got this much money, why not give us what we want—like decent pay, when we often have to start at 4 am?” one worker asked. “Even on the afternoon shift, workers may have to work from 2.30

pm to 4 am—that's 13 hours straight."

Another striker added: "They want to take everything off us. They will try to replace us with contract workers next. We don't know but we have heard about this. Already the scabs are asking for three-month contracts."

Ray Briffa, an AMWU delegate who has worked at Visy for the last 20 years, said conditions had deteriorated. "Before, we were treated like human beings. Management is ruthless. They've gotten rid of half the workforce and are making more money."

Other workers said those working on the cardboard corrugating machine were even pressured into not taking their lunch breaks. "They have to eat their lunches on the machines," one commented. He pointed out that Pratt had visited the strike-bound plants personally to examine the picket lines. "He's got plenty of power. He hasn't been in our situation—having to go on strike. Every year he builds a new factory. He has so much money but what do workers get?"

Pratt, rated as the third wealthiest individual in Australia, controls much of the country's packaging industry, as well as operations in the US and internationally. According to the *Business Review Weekly's* 1999 Rich 200 List, Pratt recently took personal control of Visy Industries after earlier handing it over to a chief executive, John White. The magazine categorised Pratt as an "authoritarian" who confesses to a "shoot, ready, aim" style.

"Nothing distracts Pratt from business," the magazine reported, although it said that Pratt was known for his lavish entertainment, including a party for 2,500 people on the banks of Melbourne's Yarra River last October to celebrate Visy's 50th anniversary.

Pratt's "style" was in evidence when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that a federal government web site had posted an advertisement for 50 security guards, to be paid \$15 a hour, who would be prepared to "cross a picket line" in an industrial dispute. A spokesman for the job agency that posted the ad—an agency associated with the Sydney City Mission charity—confirmed that the guards were wanted for the Visy dispute.

Nevertheless, the AMWU union has instructed the picketing strikers that under the terms of the Supreme Court order they now cannot even talk to the drivers of scab vehicles or their passengers, let alone attempt to

deny them entry. While the union argues that it is hamstrung by the court injunction, even before the order the union had directed members to confine themselves to conducting innocuous "peaceful assemblies".

In an AMWU Bulletin issued on July 9, Brian Henderson, the secretary of the union's Printing Division, directed that: "All members are to act in a responsible and disciplined manner." Just before the police attacked the picket lines, the Bulletin emphasised the importance of obeying police instructions: "Police have commended the union for the way in which members have acted so far."



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