

# Australian trade unions reject national strike against BHP

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26 January 2000

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) ruled out a national 24-hour stoppage across all BHP's divisions after meeting on Monday with the five unions in dispute over the resource company's introduction of individual work contracts at its iron ore sites in Western Australia's Pilbara region. The meeting decided to suspend all industrial action and instead convene protest meetings on BHP sites nationally over the next month.

The company offered substantial wage increases and lucrative bonuses to iron ore workers last November to sign individual contracts that deliver increased "workplace flexibility" to allow around-the-clock production and the greater use of contract labour. Since then, more than 500 of the 1,000 workers at the mines have reportedly signed over.

The unions now plan to concentrate on legal action against BHP in an attempt to pressure the company to negotiate a collective agreement for changed work practices. Last Thursday the five unions sought writs in the Federal Court claiming that the company breached the "freedom of association" provisions of the 1996 Workplace Relations Act when it offered inducements to union members to sign individual contracts.

Even though thousands of BHP workers around Australia have been involved in stoppages, the ACTU's carefully contrived industrial and legal campaign has nothing to do with the defense of their rights, or with protecting the conditions of their colleagues in the Pilbara. It is aimed solely at convincing the company to continue to work through the unions to achieve cost savings and flexibility.

Throughout the entire dispute neither the ACTU nor the unions have said anything about opposing BHP's sweeping changes to working conditions. On the contrary, union leaders have made it clear that they are

more than willing to cooperate.

Last month Australian Workers Union federal secretary Graham Roberts said that the five unions involved in the dispute had informed the company, through the ACTU, that they were committed, "to bring about world's best practice that would substantially lower costs in the Pilbara operations". On Monday, ACTU secretary-elect Greg Combet complained that BHP "refuses to negotiate" the changes and confirmed that the dispute was about "the right to collectively bargain".

In this light, it is significant that the ACTU has decided that the main thrust of its campaign will be a legal challenge. Last Friday Combet said the same provisions in the Workplace Relations Act were "successfully relied on by the Maritime Union in its litigation against Patrick Stevedoring in 1998" when the company sacked its 1,400 workers and replaced them with non-union labour.

The Federal Court eventually ordered the reinstatement of the sacked maritime workers and directed the company to negotiate changes in work practices with the union. The collective agreement struck between Patricks and the Maritime Union of Australia resulted in the destruction of 800 jobs and the elimination of a raft of working conditions, shift penalties and other allowances, as well as a substantial outsourcing of work. Combet played a central role in the conduct and the outcome of the maritime dispute.

The ACTU decision on Monday to suspend industrial action came after a four-day strike at BHP's Port Hedland and Mount Newman iron ore mines in the Pilbara.

At BHP's request, police armed with batons launched a vicious assault on picket lines at both sites. The pickets were driven back by lines of police who thrust

batons at workers' stomachs and chests. Several workers were injured and others were arrested.

Coal miners in BHP's underground and open cut operations in Queensland and New South Wales struck for 24 hours last Friday in protest against the police attack. A spokesman for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union admitted that the union only called the coal strike after being "deluged" with calls for action from outraged miners who had seen televised reports of the police assault.

Fearful that further confrontations on the picket line might have provoked demands for more work stoppages, the unions agreed in the West Australian Supreme Court to prevent pickets from restricting vehicles and people entering the work sites.

The spate of strikes, including those at the end of last year and earlier this month by steel workers in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, do not indicate widespread support for the union bureaucracy or its long record of collaboration with BHP.

In fact, the unions have been able to use the pent-up hostility felt by many workers toward BHP over the continuing destruction of working conditions and jobs (the result of past collective bargaining agreements negotiated by the unions) to bring workers out behind the present campaign.

BHP spokesman Ian Dymock welcomed the ACTU's decision to suspend industrial action. "We think it is good to see cool heads and common sense prevail," he said. "Irrespective of the level of union activity," he warned, "nothing will change the company's resolve to create a more competitive iron ore business in the Pilbara, and we will do whatever is necessary to achieve that goal."

The company also let it be known that it was not fazed by the recent announcement by the International Metal Workers Federation that it was considering taking action, together with the International Transport Workers Federation, to disrupt the BHP's iron ore deliveries to Japan and Korea.

BHP spokesman Michael Spencer dismissed the threat, saying: "We'd be surprised if the Australian trade union movement used its influence to take business away from a company that employs more than 10,000 trade unionists and hand it over to companies that don't employ any."

The company's decision to abandon its decades-long

relationship with the unions in its iron ore operations is bound up with a new global orientation. After suffering losses totaling \$3.8 billion over the last two years the company decided to sell the majority of its steel assets and concentrate mainly on mining and processing mineral resources. It is now looking to implement changes to match its mining competitors.



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