

Media promotes "militant" union faction in Australia

What is Workers First?

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Workers First, a faction of officials within the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), is being accorded considerable publicity by the mass media as “the tough new face of unionism”. The grouping won control of the Victorian state branch of the AMWU in union elections last month. Its leaders have won other key union posts since 1998 by claiming to be militants who are committed to the union rank-and-file.

According to the *Australian Financial Review*, Workers First is “hard Left” while the *Melbourne Age* depicts Johnston as “a workers' man; a man who speaks the dialect of the mass meeting and the stopwork”. The various radical groups, such as the Democratic Socialist Party and the International Socialist Organisation, echo these claims. They insist that Workers First represents a new and militant future for trade unionism.

The most recent publicity has surrounded a Federal Court conviction against Workers First leader and AMWU state secretary Craig Johnston and the conduct of Campaign 2000, an industry-wide log of claims, by the Metal Trades Federation of Unions (MTFU), of which the AMWU is part.

Johnston and fellow MTFU leader Dean Mighell were convicted of contempt of court on May 12 after they convened stopwork meetings last November in defiance of the federal Liberal government's punitive Workplace Relations Act. The stoppage, involving more than 40,000 manufacturing workers in Victoria, was called to discuss Campaign 2000. Johnston and Mighell were fined \$20,000 each and given until June 29 to pay. A third official, Australian Workers Union organiser Cesar Melham, escaped financial penalty after he apologised to the court.

In the aftermath of the ruling, Rupert Murdoch's *Melbourne Herald-Sun* ran a prominent article on the pair, complete with a photo of Mighell standing outside his home. Mighell declared that he knew at least 1,000 supporters who could prevent the seizure of his personal assets. Johnston too initially announced his refusal to pay, although both are due to speak at a \$500-a-head business luncheon that appears designed to raise the funds from employers to pay the fines.

The media attention being paid to Workers First reflects growing nervousness among sections of big business over signs of unrest among workers, particularly in Victoria, after more than 15 years of job destruction and union-enforced restructuring. Since 1997 the number of days lost in the state through industrial action has increased by 50 percent.

In the past four years more than 120,000 manufacturing jobs

have been wiped out nationally. Victoria, historically the centre of Australia's manufacturing industry, has been hardest hit. Permanent employment is being eliminated, replaced by casual and contract labour, and the working week has been lengthened by the introduction of 12-hour shifts and forced overtime.

Workers First emerged in 1997 in response to a series of bitter and protracted disputes over the slashing of permanent jobs and the use of contract labour. In 1996 both Kraft and ACI sacked their maintenance workforce in a bid to replace them with casuals and Nestles workers were locked-out for seven weeks, facing company demands for a 25 percent increase in productivity.

On each occasion the metal unions worked to isolate and betray these struggles, paving the way for increased casualisation of the workforce, mass redundancies and the slashing of conditions. In the Nestles dispute, for example, the AMWU refused to call out other Nestles plants and eventually pushed through a return to work based on the company's demands. Former AMWU official Carlo Frizzieri and national secretary Doug Cameron faced intense hostility from union members.

Workers First rose to prominence the following year, attacking state secretary John Corsetti's leadership as “out of touch”. The group was not formed by “rank and file members” but by a section of the AMWU leadership. Johnston, for example, had been a union organiser since 1990. Prior to their appearance in Workers First, Frank Fairley and Bronwyn Halfpenny were also office holders.

During the most recent AMWU elections, the group's candidates won control of the state branch's metal and food divisions and Johnston became AMWU state secretary. The elections registered an ongoing crisis for the union. Only 34 percent of the members bothered to vote. Of the 49,065 ballot papers issued, 31,683 were not returned.

The results show that the vast majority of manufacturing workers are either hostile or indifferent to the entire union apparatus. Nonetheless, the election of Workers First candidates is indicative of a growing dissatisfaction and militancy among workers.

Workers First claims to oppose trade-offs and backroom deals with the employers. Yet its leaders have been enforcing such trade-offs. In an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) signed by Johnston last year at Cadbury-Schweppes, the union agreed to “remove all demarcation work practices” in a range of areas, covering sales personnel, drivers and servicemen, and to allow the employment of contractors “to take up excess workload”.

Johnston and his colleagues have signed-off on similar EBAs

across Victoria, but combined this with militant posturing. The group won support in 1998-99 by leading a series of strikes against body-hire companies. Last year, for example, workers at Melbourne's Simplot factory took week-long industrial action against Manpower Services.

The outcome of the Simplot dispute, however, was not the elimination of casual employment, but rather a union agreement to *regulate* casual and contract labour. The same numbers of casuals are still employed (and some have worked there for as long as five years). The only difference is that they are now hired directly by Simplot under an agreement with the union.

Workers First has no fundamental differences with the AMWU's national officials, led by Doug Cameron. Together with Mighell, Johnston is spearheading Campaign 2000—the AMWU's national strategy. According to Johnston and Mighell, Campaign 2000 will challenge the entire EBA system. EBAs, based on separate workplace contracts, were introduced by the Keating government in 1992 with the backing of the unions.

Johnston claims the AMWU's industry-wide or “pattern-bargaining” campaign will unite workers and deliver better conditions.

But what is the real agenda of Campaign 2000? According to a union discussion paper, entitled “Background to why the Victorian Metal Unions are pursuing Campaign 2000”: “Enterprise bargaining as it actually operates, is involving many costly and bitter disputes in numerous individual companies over the details of agreements.” The document lists 18 recent disputes over EBAs, including those at ACI, Citipower and Hoover. Most lasted several weeks and many involved lockouts.

The union document concluded: “All of these disputes over the negotiation of enterprise agreements create bitterness between workers and management in individual companies which could be reduced with an industry-wide approach to bargaining. Given these protracted enterprise level disputes over agreements it is little wonder that many employers including the major industrial manufacturer Email have now chosen to go down the path of pattern bargaining because it is simpler, more efficient and [a] less industrially costly option.”

In other words, industry-wide or pattern bargaining promises industrial peace for business. That is why dozens of leading employers are backing Campaign 2000. On June 22 the *Financial Review* reported that 30 employers had signed up to the MFTU's log of industry-wide claims and 100 were set to follow before June 30.

In return for annual pay rises of 5.4 percent—barely covering inflation—the unions have effectively ditched earlier commitments to obtain a 35-hour week, merely requiring employers to discuss the issue over the next three years. The MFTU has also dumped earlier claims for the banning of forced redundancies and individual contracts.

Moreover, led by Workers First, the unions will ensure industrial peace. The *Financial Review* concluded: “If the unions can spread the deal to a significant proportion of the 1,000 Victorian manufacturing employers before July 1, they could eliminate major industrial disruption in Victoria.”

Behind the talk of union democracy and rank and file access, the

program of Workers First is based on economic nationalism, protectionism and a corporatist partnership with national- and state-based employers. The AMWU's state branch calls for the protection of Australian manufacturing against “high import penetration” and for government intervention to boost regional competitiveness. Johnston proposes a Victorian Manufacturing Council, composed of companies, unions and government leaders.

An AMWU Victorian branch policy document, “Keep the Heart of the Victorian Economy Beating,” outlines Workers First's agenda for “workplace change and innovation”. The report, sponsored by the Superannuation Trust of Australia, extols the virtues of the Hawke Labor government's partnership with the employers during the 1980s: “The national industry plans of the 1980s, covering steel, heavy engineering, cars, pharmaceuticals and textiles, clothing and footwear, provided examples of limited but significant success in policy innovation and delivery... the challenge now is to build on this approach’.

The “success” of these plans, which boosted competitiveness and profitability for some major employers, was a disaster for workers. More than 12,000 jobs were destroyed under the Steel Plan alone. Labor's industry plans, which were part of the 13-year Prices and Incomes Accord between the unions and the government, demonstrated that there is no common interest between workers and their employers. The reality is a relentless attack on jobs, wages and conditions in the struggle for markets and investment.

The Workers First program would tie workers to the interests of definite sections of the national capitalists, assisting these employers to make further inroads into jobs, wages and conditions. It should be noted that the AMWU holds up Singapore and Ireland as examples of “successful regional economies”. The manufacturing and electronics sectors in those countries rest on Free Trade Zone-style exploitation of workers.

Workers First offers no way forward for working people. To defend their interests manufacturing workers require an alternative political program—a socialist program that will champion their independent class interests against the profit requirements of capital. Instead, Johnston, Mighell and their supporters in the radical groups are attempting to create a safety valve to contain the emerging struggles of workers within the very trade union and Labor organisations that have been responsible for the far-reaching attack on jobs and conditions over the past two decades.



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