Australian power workers reject union attempt to impose job cuts

Chris Sinnema
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Power workers at Yallourn Energy in Victoria's La Trobe Valley have defied their union leadership and voted down a new three-year workplace agreement in a secret ballot conducted over three days. The result was announced on December 20.

The agreement is aimed at imposing substantial job losses, greater "flexibility" in work practices and the increased use of casual labour and contractors. The company offered a 12.5 percent wage increase spread over three years as a trade-off for the cutbacks to jobs and conditions.

The vote is a blow to the state and federal leadership of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which had pulled out all stops to push through the deal against the opposition of workers and local union delegates.

Union leaders called a mass meeting on December 14 aimed at whipping the workers into line. CFMEU national secretary John Maitland, who flew from Sydney to attend the meeting, attempted to browbeat workers by warning that if they rejected the deal the matter would go to arbitration and they would be worse off.

Maitland, who has imposed cuts to jobs and conditions on coal miners for more than a decade, made clear that the union would not support future industrial action and that the Yallourn Energy workers would be on their own. He was backed by CFMEU state secretary John van Camp who had already signed the agreement in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) in late November and agreed to the company's demands for a secret ballot.

But Maitland and van Camp faced considerable opposition. The mass meeting endorsed a resolution proposed by local union delegates instructing state and federal union leaders to "stop recommending Yallourn Energy's rotten deal".

Luke van der Meulen, a local CFMEU branch secretary, campaigned against the deal. Earlier in the month, he said: "Yallourn Energy gets everything they want in that document; they have never had any intentions of negotiating. If it goes ahead the power companies will try and spread it across the Valley, and we think it will lead to a direct loss of 1,000 jobs plus whatever indirect job losses there are."

Workers first became aware of Yallourn Energy's restructuring agenda, not through the union, but after a leaked memo was published in the *Age* newspaper on October 30, revealing that the company was planning to sell or lease its coal mine, axe 226 permanent jobs and run the operation using contract labour.

The memo stated that the company intended to impose its aims through a new workplace agreement and advocated a "feral approach" in negotiations: that is, workers should be treated in the same manner as feral animals.

The *Age* article also revealed that former Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Bill Kelty, now a director of the giant transport corporation Linfox, had been advising Yallourn Energy management on the best means to push through the job cuts. Linfox's subsidiary Roach Thiess was seeking to buy Yallourn Energy's mining operations.

A wildcat strike of control room operators at the Yallourn, Loy Yang B and Hazelwood power stations erupted on November 2 after IRC Commissioner John Lewin signalled his intention to end the "bargaining period" for a new enterprise agreement. Lewin's move effectively blocked industrial action, which is legally restricted to the negotiating period.

Less than an hour after the workers walked off the job, the management obtained a Supreme Court

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injunction against CFMEU state and local officials and panel operators ordering an end to industrial action at all three power stations.

Victoria's state Labor Party government headed by Premier Steve Bracks immediately opposed the strike, invoking, for the second time this year, emergency measures under the Electricity Industry Act. The government imposed statewide power restrictions and accused the strikers of inconveniencing the public and holding Victoria to ransom.

Van Camp and other state union officials publicly refused to back the strike action, saying it had not been authorised by the union leadership. Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Leigh Hubbard issued a media statement condemning the strike “as unacceptable and unlawful”.

After late-night discussions with state Industrial Relations Minister Monica Gould on November 2, CFMEU state bureaucrats pressured local delegates to call off the strike. Yallourn Energy and Loy Yang management obtained an order from IRC Commissioner Lewin banning industrial action for six months and opening the way for the company to sue workers for damages.

Following this week's rejection of the enterprise deal CFMEU officials will, without doubt, redouble their efforts to wear down the resistance of power workers, keep them isolated and pave the way for the eventual imposition of the company's demands.

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