

Divisive union campaign raises vital questions for Australian workers

Terry Cook
15 May 2001

Three months ago the Electrical Trade Union in Victoria applied to the State Industrial Relations Commission to have clauses inserted into 600 new enterprise work agreements to compel non-union workers to pay an annual \$500 service fee to the union. In accordance with the ruling, employers are now responsible for making the fees part of their employment contracts with non-union workers.

It has come as no surprise that the ETU's successful application has seen a number of other unions, particularly those covering workers in the public service, declare they will take the same road. Clearly the union bureaucracy looks on the service fees scheme as a godsend that will enable them to arrest the decline in union funds caused by a decade-long exodus of dues-paying members and by the unions' inability to recruit young workers.

Of course the scheme could not be presented to union members as simply a means of revenue gathering that had nothing to do with defending their interests. To provide a veneer of legitimacy, some union leaders have claimed that their actions have been driven from the shop floor, by rank-and-file union members who are sick of "freeloaders", that is non-union workers who supposedly gain from union-negotiated agreements, but contribute nothing to the unions.

It highly unlikely, however, that there has ever been any significant support for the fees scheme. While some workers who have stayed in the unions do feel a degree of animosity towards those who have left, most have only remained inside because they believe that to do so constitutes a lesser evil than being out on their own.

The desire among union workers for unity and some form of collective struggle, though far from being clearly expressed or articulated, is entirely progressive. The union leadership, however, has cynically channelled this sentiment behind an operation aimed at serving its own bureaucratic interests. Moreover, the officials seek to lay the blame on non-union workers for the continuing breakdown in working class unity—for which the unions themselves are entirely responsible.

The vast majority of workers who have turned their backs on the unions have done so out of total disillusionment with the years of constant betrayals and defeats, not because they reject the need for solidarity. These workers no longer regard the unions as organisations that will, in any way, prosecute a struggle on behalf of their members.

There is no question that if organisations existed that fought

uncompromisingly for workers' interests, there would be few problems winning workers to them or maintaining their loyalty, no matter what the hardships.

The commitment of masses of workers to the class struggle—and the sacrifices they made to build the unions—was not brought about by bureaucratic bullying. It arose out of a basic understanding that workers could only advance their interests through collective class action. This rudimentary conception was encapsulated in such slogans as "An injury to one is an injury to all", sentiments that are rarely, if ever, expressed by union bureaucrats today even for the purposes of holiday speechifying.

It is entirely lawful that the union leadership, in embracing "service fees," has no compunction about redefining the organisations they head as "bargaining service agencies" employing the user-pays system so favored by big business and its political representatives.

Based as they are on class compromise, the unions have always acted to restrict class solidarity and contain the class struggle within the framework of the capitalist system. They have never challenged the right of capital to exploit the working class. Their role has been to act as bartering agencies within the system for a better price for workers' labour power, that is, a larger share of the national income in the form of wages.

However, even when the unions did make limited gains, this was always at the expense of the long-term interests of the working class. Short-term economic advances were used to tie workers more firmly to the profit system and to undermine a socialist perspective, which insisted that lasting improvements could only be achieved by carrying through a fundamental and revolutionary transformation of the economic and social order.

The form of organisation that flowed from the union leaders' outlook was one based on the narrowest trade, industry and geographical lines. Divisions between the different unions were maintained and strengthened by generations of union bureaucrats, who shamelessly utilised them to play one section of workers off against another in their interminable turf wars for union coverage. Inevitably these divisions assisted the employers at every turn.

Over the past 15 years, the unions have accelerated the process of dividing workers and smashing up working class solidarity. During this period the advent of vast global changes in the production process, associated with developments in computer technology and advanced communications, has created conditions where employers can rapidly relocate production. This has

undermined the national reformist perspective on which the unions were based.

Whereas the unions could once squeeze limited concessions from the employers by threatening to shut down production through industrial action, the changed conditions allowed employers to threaten to close their industries themselves and move elsewhere unless their demands were met. The unions progressively abandoned any struggle, even for minimal demands, and rapidly adapted themselves to the prevailing situation, agreeing to help make “their own” employers “internationally competitive”.

This process has seen the working class shackled ever-more directly to the interests of the employers, pitting workers in Australia against their class brothers overseas, or state against state and even within industries and workplaces, to set ever-more exploitative benchmarks that are then imposed everywhere.

But delivering the new requirements of big business was by no means a peaceful process. The Labor and union leadership were required to stamp out all resistance and ruthlessly repress any attempt to establish a unified opposition to the assault on jobs, working conditions and basic rights.

Any expression of class solidarity was trampled underfoot and the working class suppressed and disciplined. Even the very limited forms of democracy within the union movement were destroyed, guaranteeing that workers would have no collective voice over the direction being taken by the organisations for which they had fought and sacrificed.

This was the essence of the Accord (social contract) struck between the Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1983, which committed the unions to work for the redirection of an ever-greater proportion of the national income away from wages, salaries and working conditions directly into profits.

Struggles waged by workers, such as that of the sacked South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) workers in 1985, to defend union rights and to fight the use of non-union scab labour, were isolated and betrayed by the ACTU and the unions.

During the next decade the ACTU and its affiliates were to prove willing to cross any line in the service of big business, including the annihilation of fellow unions. In 1986 they assisted the government in deregistering and breaking the Builders Labourers Federation and in 1989 supported the busting of the airline pilots' wage dispute, which involved a scabbing operation that made use of the airforce.

The continuous dismantling of hard-won conditions remains the essence of every union-negotiated enterprise work agreement today. Union members are forced to accept job cuts, surrender working conditions and deliver greater flexibility to obtain a pittance of a pay increase.

Union leaders can talk all they like about “freeloaders,” but one only has to look at their generous salaries and conditions, which continue to rise even as those of their members decline, to see who the real freeloaders are. Most union secretaries receive in excess of \$100,000 annually and enjoy other benefits such as the use of cars, free phones and generous travel and expense allowances.

There is little doubt that over the last five years the unions have

come under increasing attack by the federal Liberal government and sections of the employers. Prime Minister John Howard condemned the introduction of “service fees” as an attempt to reintroduce compulsory unionism that was abolished in 1996 under the government's Workplace Relations Act. The legislation made any action by workers to enforce a closed union shop illegal.

Throughout the years of the Accord, the major corporations relied directly on the unions to enforce their requirements, often viewing them as simply another personnel department or a junior arm of management. Up until very recently, mining and minerals giant BHP defended the unions against criticism from other corporate entities, referring to them affectionately as “our unions”.

That many employers, including the once “union-friendly” ones, are now moving to utilise the government's legislation to de-unionise their workplaces and impose individual work contracts, is certainly not out of fear of the unions.

Under conditions of ruthless global competition and the uninterrupted introduction of new techniques and technology, companies are increasingly required to implement far-reaching changes almost instantaneously to maintain a competitive edge over their rivals. Many have begun to view the lengthy enterprise bargaining process, essential to the unions to push unpalatable changes onto their members, as far too cumbersome and time consuming.

Corporate leaders also believe that a decade and a half of outright betrayals have reduced the unions to squeezed lemons that control a rapidly declining membership and are no longer capable of delivering their future requirements.

Workers cannot combat the betrayals of the unions simply by leaving them. Nor can they solve the problems they face by staying inside in the vain hope that these moribund organisations can be revived or pressured to act in workers' interests.

The revival of the workers' movement and of the great traditions of class solidarity can only take place on the basis of a program that recognises that the interests of the working class are irreconcilably opposed to those of the employers and rejects all forms of class collaboration. Only on this foundation can workers begin to construct organisations that will fight intransigently to defend their interests.

This requires, above all else, that workers reject all forms of nationalism and begin to recognise that they form part of an international class, which is both the indispensable component in the productive process and the only force capable of reorganising society on the basis of new social priorities—the fulfillment of social needs, not private profit.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact