

Australian union officials charged over "run through" stunt

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Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Victorian branch secretary Craig Johnston, the union's state president John Speight and four other unionists appeared before the Melbourne Magistrates Court on July 10, charged with aggravated burglary, riot and affray, and criminal damage.

They have been accused of leading what the media has called a "run through" at the suburban offices of labour hire company Skilled Engineering on June 15, allegedly resulting in damage to computers and other office equipment.

The charges carry a maximum 25-year jail sentence. In addition, the federal Workplace Relations Act prohibits anyone from holding a union office after serving a jail term for an offence involving intentional damage or destruction of property.

The alleged incident occurred when Johnson Tiles in the Melbourne suburb of Bayswater sacked 29 workers and handed the plant's maintenance work over to Skilled Engineering. The contract workers sent to the tile plant by Skilled Engineering crossed a picket line manned by the sacked men.

Skilled Engineering laid charges against the union officials, but Johnson Tiles decided not to proceed with a complaint over a similar alleged "raid" on its offices. The state branch of the AMWU, led by Johnston's Workers First faction, then accepted the job losses.

Despite the serious nature of the charges—aggravated burglary, riot and affray, and criminal damage—there are indications, including wildly varying press reports about the actual extent of the damage, that the Skilled Engineering "run through" was a somewhat pathetic affair. Even so, the media immediately branded the incident as a "violent rampage", a "ruckus" and "industrial terrorism".

Directly or otherwise, the media beat-up is bound up

with the federal election due toward the end of the year. Big business has already indicated that whichever party comes to power—Liberal or Labor—it will be expected to press ahead with the agenda of "labor market reforms" that has ground to a halt over the past two and a half years.

In recent months, the Howard government has been attempting to whip up anti-union hysteria to provide the conditions to press ahead with further sweeping changes in the industrial relations arena. The government has also been desperate to find an issue to distract attention from the political and electoral setbacks it has suffered in recent months.

On July 17, two months after first raising the question, Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott declared that the cabinet had agreed to hold a royal commission into supposed union violence and corruption in the construction industry. Together with allegations directly related to the building industry, Abbott cited a number of puerile union stunts, including the incident at Skilled Engineering. Prime Minister John Howard formally announced the royal commission on July 26.

No doubt, the reaction of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, its various affiliates and the Victorian Trades Hall Council to the charges against Johnston and his associates contributed to the government's decision to proceed with the witchhunting inquiry.

Within days of the charges being laid, ACTU secretary Greg Combet issued a media statement saying "the ACTU clearly and unequivocally rejects the instigation of violence, intimidation or destruction of property during industrial disputes". According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report, the ACTU chief had "become furious" when a number of union officials

asked him to urge Skilled Engineering to drop the complaint.

AMWU national secretary Doug Cameron said he was “gravely concerned” that union officials had been charged with such offences and promptly refused any financial assistance from the union to assist in mounting a legal defence.

The Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) on July 13 endorsed a resolution formulated by Johnston supporter and VTHC president Dean Mighel, that praised the “proud history of service” of the six charged unionists, but called on “all parties involved in industrial disputes” to “refrain from acts of aggression”.

The resolution cleared the way for VTHC secretary Leigh Hubbard to declare the next day that “while the occupation of a site was at times a legitimate industrial tactic”, he would condemn such actions if they “involved violence, property damage or intimidation”.

While Combet, Cameron and Hubbard know that the stunts of Johnston and his Workers First colleagues constitute no real threat to the employers, they are anxious to distance the unions from any suggestion of militancy, real or imagined. Their aim is to reassure big business that the unions remain “responsible” and can still be relied upon to restrain workers.

They are also concerned that the protests, however ineffectual, could affect business support for the Labor Party’s bid for government. After the incident at Skilled Engineering, the ACTU went as far as to publicly apologise to Labor leader Kim Beazley for inadvertently allowing him to be photographed alongside Johnston at a recent ACTU function.

Johnston’s actions have nothing to do with challenging the pro-capitalist program of the ACTU or the Labor Party. One only has to ask why the Johnston leadership, which heads a union branch that could call industrial action against JohnsonTiles and Skilled Engineering, resorts to such impotent tactics as “run-throughs”.

The purpose of such stunts is twofold. First, they are aimed at maintaining the illusion among sections of metal workers that Workers First represents an alternative to the open betrayals of other sections of the union bureaucracy. At the same time, they serve to block the development of a real movement of manufacturing workers to oppose factory closures, the

destruction of jobs and the growth of contract labour.

Workers First emerged in 1997 after the state and federal AMWU leadership sold out a series of disputes in Victoria over the mass sackings of maintenance workers and their replacement by contractors, alongside the elimination of thousands of manufacturing jobs generally.

Tapping into the growing restiveness among manufacturing workers, the group—formed by second-rank union officials—won a number of leading positions in the Victorian AMWU metal and food divisions and this year Johnston became AMWU state secretary.

The media bolstered the group’s militant credentials, presenting it as “hard left” and as the “new tough face of unionism”. These claims were echoed by the various radical groups, such as the Democratic Socialist Party and the International Socialists.

Over the past two years, however, Workers First has proven to be no threat to the employers. Under the workplace agreements struck in the recent Metal Trades Federation of Unions Campaign 2000, the Johnston leadership effectively dropped its earlier commitment to win a 35-hour week and dumped demands for a halt to redundancies and individual contracts. In return, metal workers gained average annual pay rises of 5.4 percent, barely enough to cover inflation.

Now, in an attempt to cover its tracks, the group has sponsored antics that not only divert workers into dead-end protests, but also directly assist the employers and their political representatives to prepare new attacks on workers’ basic rights.

The royal commission, like previous government-sponsored anti-union inquiries, will be a launching pad for further draconian industrial legislation. Having helped create the conditions for such a development, Johnston, together with the rest of the union leadership, will not mount any campaign to fight it. As in the past, the result will become an excuse for the entire trade union bureaucracy to adapt even more sharply to the demands of big business.



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