

Australian maritime union accepts job losses

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The occupation by nine seamen of the CSL Yarra in South Australia's Port Pirie was brought to an abrupt end last Thursday after the Maritime Union of Australia cobbled together a deal with the ship's owners in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

The workers began the protest on May 2 in opposition to plans by Canada Steam Ship Lines (CSL) to sell the Yarra to its Shanghai subsidiary CSL Asia, reregister the ship in the Bahamas as a flag of convenience vessel and hire a Ukrainian crew on lower wages and inferior working conditions.

While the MUA heralded the deal as a "victory", the settlement guarantees none of the jobs of the ship's 17-member crew or 18-strong replacement crew. Nor does it establish any basis for a struggle against future attacks by shipping companies on the jobs and working conditions of seafarers.

Under the agreement, CSL will allow the ship to make four more trips manned by the Australian crew. The purpose-built cement carrier will then be removed from trading on the Australian coast and reregistered in the Bahamas. Despite claims to the contrary, the Yarra seamen will be left in limbo. They will be forced to accept the redundancy package offered by CSL and then be jobless.

The union is holding out the hope that at the end of the four voyages the displaced crew will be taken on by another shipping company that will have stepped in to take over the Yarra's cement runs. According to an MUA bulletin, "several" companies are considering registering a ship in Australia, staffing it with Australian seamen and taking over cement haulage contracts, including with South Australian-based Adelaide Brighten Cement, normally serviced by the Yarra.

However, in a media interview on Thursday morning, MUA National Secretary Paddy Crumlin admitted there were "no guarantees." Crumlin said the settlement had only begun a "process" and the union had "always been committed to a process."

The MUA also claims that a statement by cement

industry representatives in the IRC last week registering a preference "for Australian labour and Australian-flagged vessels" would be a key factor in attracting a shipping company to commit itself to the Australian venture. However, the cement companies are likely to prove far less patriotic than the MUA itself. When push comes to shove they will opt for the best haulage price for their goods, no matter what nationality the company making the offer happens to be.

With the removal of the Yarra, and with the absence of any other Australian-flagged cement carriers, the way is now open, not only for CSL to use flag of convenience ships to cart cement, but for any other overseas-registered vessels. Under the present cabotage laws, the government can issue a permit to an overseas vessel to ply trade on the Australian coast, provided there is no locally-registered ship available.

Federal Transport Minister John Anderson issued a permit for CSL's other cement carrier, CSL Pacific, to cart cargo while the Yarra was occupied. He confirmed that he would not hesitate to do so again if local ships were not available. The CSL Pacific is registered in the Bahamas and manned by a Ukrainian crew.

From the very first day, the MUA worked to ensure that the occupation of the Yarra remained at the level of a protest and did not become a focal point for a broad mobilisation of working people to fight the assault of the shipping companies and the Howard government. Such a development would have disrupted the union's relationship with the Australian-based shipping companies and cut across their ability to conclude the deal.

Instead of a perspective aimed at uniting Australian seamen with their overseas counterparts, including the exploited Ukrainian seamen, for an internationally coordinated struggle to defend the jobs and working conditions of all seafarers, the MUA promoted the crudest nationalism. This was combined with pleas to the Howard government to act on behalf of the Yarra crew and to defend cabotage.

If one thing has been demonstrated in the course of the dispute, it is that jobs cannot be defended through cabotage laws, or by a program based on national regulation. It is precisely such policies that have served to subordinate Australian seamen to the drive of the national shipping companies to cut operating costs and gain a competitive edge against their foreign rivals. Despite the cabotage laws, during the past two decades the MUA has acted on behalf of the shipowners and presided over the slashing of manning levels on all Australian vessels and the destruction of hundreds of seafaring jobs.

Since ending the Yarra occupation, the MUA has issued statements vilifying overseas seamen working on flag of convenience ships. Drawing on the same chauvinist rhetoric used by the Howard government to justify its assault on refugees, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin has referred to what he terms a “startling contradiction” in the government’s anti-refugee policy.

Writing in the union’s bulletin, Crumlin complained that while the government, “tightened entry to our shores for tourists, travellers and asylum seekers, it continues to open up our coastline to foreign shipping and automatically grants special visas to foreign crews”. He went on to claim that “flag of convenience shipping” has been “linked to terrorist networks, including that of Osama bin Laden.”

The bulletin condemned “crew jumping ships” that “avoid immigration” and lamented the fact that “between March 1996 and April 1999, 263 seafarers jumped ship in Australia and only 148 were located”.

These comments are aimed at blaming overseas seamen for the crisis facing Australian seamen and diverting workers’ hostility away from those who bear direct responsibility—Australian shipowners, the Howard government and the MUA.



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