

Australia: Maritime union promotes nationalism in CSL Yarra dispute

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Nine Australian seamen are continuing an occupation of the bulk cargo ship CSL Yarra in Port Pirie, South Australia, in defiance of a company order instructing them to leave. The seamen began the occupation on May 2 and Canada Steamship Lines (CSL) is now seeking a Supreme Court injunction to have them removed, accusing them of “acts tantamount to piracy”.

The protest started after CSL went ahead and sold the Yarra to its Shanghai subsidiary, CSL Asia, at the end of last month and launched proceedings to reregister the ship in the Bahamas as a “flag of convenience” vessel. The company intends to dismiss the ship’s 17-member Australian crew and its 18-strong replacement crew, substituting them with Ukrainian sailors on far lower wages and inferior working conditions.

By selling the Yarra, once owned by CSL Australia, the Canadian-based parent group is attempting to avoid Australian cabotage laws and cut the ship’s operating costs by an estimated \$A2 million. According to a union spokesman, the overseas crew would be paid approximately \$A500 each per week, about half the wage of an Australian seafarer.

While the Federal Liberal government has not openly stated its support for CSL’s actions, there are strong indications that it has been closely involved in the re-flagging operation. Since coming to power in 1996, the Howard government has worked to drive through far-reaching “industrial reform” on the Australian waterfront. In 1998 the government backed an operation by Patrick Stevedoring to sack its entire 1,400-strong workforce and replace it with scab contract labour.

The Patrick operation was aimed at slashing the number of waterfront workers and massively increasing productivity. Although the company was eventually forced to reemploy the sacked union workers, it was able to achieve the job losses and productivity gains by brokering a deal with the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). The deal involved the loss of 626 jobs—almost half the workforce—the destruction of over 100 working conditions, introduction of extended shifts and the outsourcing of maintenance and other non-core work.

During the past five years, the Federal government has made no secret of the fact that it would also like to get rid of existing cabotage laws, which require ships plying their trade on the Australian coast to be registered in Australia and manned by

local seamen.

It is little wonder, therefore, that Federal Transport Minister John Anderson tacitly supported the decision of the Federal Court on April 28, when it dismissed an application by the MUA to maintain an earlier injunction putting a stay on CSL selling the Yarra and sacking its crew.

The MUA argued that CSL’s action breached anti-discrimination provisions in the Federal Workplace Relations Act, claiming that the Yarra crewmen were being sacked because they were union members. Justice Catherine Branson rejected the claim and accepted CSL’s position that its decision was motivated by the desire for “cost effectiveness” and “longer term strategic advantages”.

Ignoring the MUA’s pleas for government intervention to block the Yarra’s sale, Anderson declared, following the Federal Court decision, that the “MUA must adopt competitive practices”. He said the government would “stand by” a 1912 statute that allows foreign ships to work the Australian coastal lanes “if local vessels are not available”.

Further evidence of government involvement with CSL has emerged since the occupation of the Yarra. Anderson issued a single voyage permit to CSL’s other Bahamas-registered carrier, CSL Pacific, allowing it to take a load of cement from Adelaide to Melbourne. Under normal circumstances, the shipment would have been carried by the Yarra, which was contracted to move bulk cargo around the Australian coast.

The permit was issued even though the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) was still conducting an investigation into a serious accident on the CSL Pacific earlier this year. This contravenes the government’s own guidelines, which stipulate that if a ship is under ATSB investigation, its permit to operate on the Australian coast must be canceled.

The action by the Yarra crew has won wide support among sections of the working class in South Australia and nationally, who are genuinely concerned that the CSL operation will set a precedent for all ship owners to carry out similar attacks on wages and working conditions. Presently there are 47 Australian-registered ships operating on the Australian coast, down from 90 in 1996.

Since the Yarra occupation began, many hundreds of

working people have turned out to man the “community picket” on the dock near the ship, and workers and local residents have donated food and money to the seamen on board. After the company cut off power to the occupied ship, residents and supporters supplied portable toilets, showers and power generators. Workers in nearby industries have held work stoppages in support and working people in Melbourne have picketed the docks to block the CSL Pacific from unloading its cement cargo.

The MUA, however, has attempted to steer the growing opposition behind pleas to the Federal government to “intervene as a matter of urgency” and “to ensure the long-term future” of seafarers. This is despite clear evidence that the government has been manoeuvring behind the scenes to encourage CSL and back its operation.

At the same time, the union is working to channel the dispute into a series of legal appeals under the Federal Workplace Relations Act, which will become, as they have in the past, the justification for calling off all independent action.

The union has already offered to negotiate with CSL to cut back the conditions of the Yarra crews. On May 1, the union issued a statement reporting that officials had met with CSL chief executive Chris Soronsen after the company offered redundancy to the ship’s crew. “The union has rejected this and wants to negotiate cost savings and keep the crew on board,” the statement said.

Even more destructive is the MUA’s incessant promotion of the crudest nationalism, which cuts directly across any unified struggle with the Ukrainian seafarers being recruited by the shipping companies and with other overseas seamen facing similar attacks.

From day one, the MUA has centred its campaign on the slogan “Aussie jobs for Aussie workers”, not decent jobs and working conditions for all seamen. Employing nationalist rhetoric similar to that used by the Howard government to justify its recent assault on so-called “illegal” immigrants and its anti-refugee “border protection” policy, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin said on May 3: “Our members, though, are standing firm in defence of their jobs, Australian shipping and the integrity of the national coastline.” Not surprisingly, the MUA has consistently issued calls for the Howard government to “protect Australian interests”.

As the dispute has progressed, the display of chauvinism has only become more pronounced. The union’s May 8 bulletin declared: “We believe the ramifications of introducing cheap foreign labour to an integral Australian industry will be the catalyst for the introduction of foreign replacement workers in other Australian industries”. The bulletin railed against “foreign workers” who “pay no taxes in Australia”.

Federal Labor Opposition leader Simon Crean, having refused to make any comment in support of the Yarra seafarers since CSL first made its intentions known in December last year, finally found his voice last week, but only to bolster the

nationalist direction taken by the MUA.

Addressing the wives of Yarra seamen who visited him on May 12, Crean condemned the Federal government, saying its action on the issue stood in “stark contrast” to its “focus” on border protection. “It’s ridiculous,” Crean said. “They want to talk about border protection, but they want to destroy our merchant navy.”

Crean failed to mention to the seamen’s wives that it was a former Labor government which privatised the state-owned Australian National Line, allowing CSL to purchase the Yarra and the River Torrens, which was re-named CSL Pacific.

Seamen in Australia cannot defend their jobs and conditions on the basis of a perspective that shackles them behind the “national interest” and pits them against their fellow workers overseas. For two decades, the maritime unions, acting on this very perspective, have presided over the destruction of thousands of jobs on ships and wharves and the dismantling of hard-fought conditions. The unions’ claim that making Australian-based shipping employers “internationally competitive” against their foreign rivals would be the means of assuring Australian seamen a decent future, has proven to be a gross deception.

The global assault being conducted by shipping companies on jobs and working conditions, including the use of a massive pool of unemployed labour, can only be answered on the basis of a perspective that rejects all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and fights to unite seamen internationally.

As a first step, in opposition to the MUA’s calls to defend the “national interest”—which, in reality, is nothing other than the interests of the ship owners—the Yarra crew should issue an appeal to all seamen, including the exploited Ukrainian crews, to organise a joint, internationally coordinated struggle to defend the jobs and conditions of seafarers everywhere.



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