

Australian maritime union "victory" opens further attack on seamen's jobs and conditions

Terry Cook
12 August 2002

Barely three months after the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) claimed to have scored a victory in a dispute with Canadian-based shipping company CSL, the agreement it brokered has begun to unravel. In May, the MUA abruptly ended a 13-day occupation organised by crew members on CSL's bulk carrier the *Yarra* to oppose the company's decision to re-flag the ship in the Bahamas and hire a Ukrainian crew on lower wages and inferior working conditions.

The occupation in Port Pirie, South Australia, won considerable support among working people locally and nationally, but the union leadership recommended an end to the action after cobbling together a tenuous agreement in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), claiming it would protect the workers' jobs.

The deal involved CSL extending the employment of the *Yarra's* crew for a short period before taking the ship off the Australian coast and registering in the Bahamas as a flag of convenience vessel. The MUA presented the deal as a deft move on its part because the current cabotage laws, restricting the domestic use of foreign ships, would prevent the re-flagged ship from again plying trade on the Australian coast.

This, the union said, would leave the way open for another company to commit an Australian-manned vessel to take over haulage contracts once serviced by the *Yarra*. Indeed, union officials suggested that certain shipping companies had expressed interest in the scheme.

However, despite the union's claim, no company was willing to provide a ship. With the absence of any Australian-manned vessel capable of doing the required haulage (a condition required under the cabotage laws) the way was open for CSL to use the re-flagged *Yarra*.

Not only did the bulk carrier, now renamed the *Stadacona*, reappear on the Australian coast at the end of last month, but CSL also moved to take preemptive legal action against the unions. It sought a permanent injunction against five senior

union officials, including Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharon Burrows. Warning that it could sue the ACTU for damages, the company alleged that the union officials had acted illegally by threatening action to block CSL's operations.

On July 29, Burrows fervently denied ever having made such threats, saying she was "surprised and disappointed" by CSL's legal action.

In fact, the ACTU has never suggested any industrial action to defend seafaring jobs. Both the ACTU and the MUA have all but abandoned the former *Yarra* crew members, who have been left to stage futile protests. On August 2, several of the displaced seamen chained themselves to pylons on the Gladstone wharf in Queensland when the *Stadacona* visited to pick up a load of clinker for Brisbane. One despondent seaman described it as a "personal protest".

The defeat inflicted on the *Yarra* seamen, and the grovelling performance of the unions, has prepared the conditions for further attacks on seamen's jobs and working conditions. In the closing week of July, shipping company ANL dismissed the Australian crew from its ship *OOCL Australia* after diverting the vessel from its scheduled stop in Brisbane, Queensland. The crewmembers were dumped after being paid off in Taiwan just before the ship, manned by an overseas crew, headed off to the Bahamas to be re-registered.

On August 4, following an appeal by the union, the AIRC put a temporary hold on ANL's action and ordered the company to meet with the union. The MUA immediately heralded the decision as a "spectacular victory". In reality, the ruling was based on a Workplace Relations Act provision that merely requires a company sacking more than 15 employees to first consult with the unions involved. As soon as ANL has fulfilled this limited requirement, it will simply carry on with its plans, confident of receiving little trouble from the unions.

Throughout the *Yarra* dispute, the MUA promoted global standards of “best practice,” involving never-ending drives to cut costs. Ship owners have increasingly registered their vessels in a host of “flag of convenience” countries to evade tax liabilities and national regulations requiring them to hire local crews at higher wage rates.

In fact, as the dispute continued, the union bulletins became progressively worse, pillorying seamen on flag of convenience ships as “foreign workers” who “pay no taxes in Australia” and calling on MUA members and supporters to “defend the integrity of the national coastline”.

The outcome of the dispute demonstrates the bankruptcy of any perspective based on the nation state and forms of protectionism such as cabotage, introduced in the early 1900s to safeguard the interests of national shipping companies. The cabotage laws specified that foreign-owned ships could only be used along the national coast if an equivalent Australian ship was not available. To prevent overseas companies paying lower wages to undercut Australian shippers, the legislation specified that crews on coastal ships be paid Australian rates.

In the past, the maritime unions were able to utilise the cabotage laws to gain certain limited concessions for their members. However, these gains ultimately undermined the development of an internationalist perspective and tied seafarers to the national employers.

Over the past two decades, the globalisation of production has rendered national-based production, and with it, national-based shipping, increasingly redundant. With transnational corporations re-organising production on an international basis, all forms of transport have been revolutionised accordingly.

Containerisation, the development of specially-designed vessels to handle specific bulk cargoes, and the introduction of advanced cargo handling techniques on board ships and in major ports have speeded up cargo turn-around times. Ships carry increasing cargo loads with ever-smaller crews. Raw materials and manufacturing components can be shipped almost anywhere in the world at cheaper or comparable rates to domestic haulage.

Between 1988 and 1998, there was a considerable growth in the number of specialised ships. While general cargo (multi-deck) carriers decreased by 2.5 percent, bulk carriers increased by 3.4 percent, liquid gas carriers by 5.8 percent and container ships by 9 percent. On average, bulk carriers have 15- to 20-men crews, most chemical carriers have 17 to 22, and container vessels have as few as 15.

A “national shipping line” has no attraction for companies that must compete on a global scale. The competitiveness of shipping companies is no longer measured by national, but

According to an International Labor Organisation report, “the world’s largest fleets are now either flags of convenience vessels or are on secondary registers”. It estimates that by 1989, measured in gross tonnage, the “international fleet” had grown to 44.5 percent of all shipping. By 1999, this had increased to 64 percent.

The flags flown by ships rarely correspond to the national composition of their crews, many of which are now multinational. The report estimates that 20 percent of seafarers manning ships in the international fleet are Filipino, with many others coming from India, Russia, the Ukraine and Poland.

The report points to “(t)he eradication of national boundaries in the labour market for seafarers” and the emergence of a “global workforce” recruited through “highly organised, extensive global networks linking ship owners, crew managers, labour-supply agencies and training facilities”.

In this context, the struggle for “national” jobs and conditions is archaic and cuts across the need for the international unification of the seafarers.

Because of their social existence, seamen have always tended toward internationalism. In the early part of the 20th century, many were involved in the organisation of the socialist movement, carrying information to far-flung corners of the earth and participating in and assisting the struggles of workers worldwide. These traditions need to be revived and taken to a new level.

While the shipping companies utilise the globalised environment to slash jobs, drive down wages and working conditions to boost profits, the creation of a truly “global workforce” not only demands, but also provide the basis for, the establishment of a common international struggle by seafarers against the shipping cartels.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact