

Australia: intra-union brawl opens door to state attacks

Margaret Rees, Terry Cook
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During the past 12 months, the national leadership of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and its national secretary Doug Cameron have been waging a factional war to remove rival Craig Johnston from his position as secretary of the union's Victorian state branch and to bust up the Workers First (WF) group that he leads.

The Victorian-based Workers First faction was founded in 1997 when a number of second-rank union officials moved to distance themselves from the national leadership, following a series of betrayals of key industrial disputes that fuelled widespread hostility among manufacturing workers in the state.

Even though none of the officials who formed WF are on public record as having opposed the deals brokered by the national leadership, the distancing manoeuvre allowed the faction to tap into growing rank-and-file discontent and win a number of leading state branch positions in 1998. Since then, WF has worked to establish its own relations with sections of Victorian employers by offering itself as the best means to control militant workers.

At the same time, the faction has attempted to maintain its base of support through a combination of limited industrial action, puerile protest stunts and noisy left rhetoric while avoiding any genuine mobilisation of workers to defend jobs and working conditions. Its actions have been heralded by the various middle class protest groups as a "revival" of militant unionism. Sections of the media present Johnston as the "new tough face of unionism".

However, despite its claims to represent an alternative, WF has no fundamental differences with the pro-business polices of the national leadership. It is based on the same nationalist political perspective, accepting entirely the framework of the profit system, and works to subordinate its members to the interests of employers.

The current bitter factional warfare is essentially over who will control the various parts of the union apparatus. By seeking to maintain their own base of operations in Victoria, Johnston and his supporters are cutting across the agenda of the union's national council.

The national leadership wants to strengthen its hold over every aspect of the union's apparatus, as it moves to forge a new relationship with major manufacturing employers, particularly the country's car producers. It regards this as necessary if it is to be able to deal rapidly with any opposition by workers to further attacks on jobs and working conditions and convince employers it

has the capability to suppress industrial action.

The brawl has become the overriding preoccupation of both factions. Neither represents in any way the interests of rank-and-file union members and both have resorted to the most unprincipled methods, including harnessing the capitalist courts, for their factional manoeuvres. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the AMWU National Council has sunk to new depths in pursuit of its ends. Johnston and other members of WF face serious charges arising from union protests in Melbourne on June 15 last year, and Cameron's faction is trying to use their predicament to its own advantage.

The charges relate to an alleged "run through" by a group of workers, purportedly lead by Johnston, at the offices of Johnston Tiles and contract hire company Skilled Engineering, after the tile company sacked 29 workers and replaced them with contract labour. At the time, Johnston Tiles refrained from taking legal action over the incident, but Skilled Engineering had charges brought against Johnston, state AMWU president John Speight and union organisers Linda Pope, Terry Bradley, and John Danby, as well as unionists Gregory Warren and Tony Mavridis.

While the police claim that the unionists caused extensive damage to computers and other office equipment as they ran through Skilled Engineering's premises, the charges are out of all proportion to what was a relatively minor incident. They include riot, affray, aggravated burglary and criminal damage and if found guilty the accused could face jail sentences of between 10 to 25 years. In addition, Johnston could be permanently barred from holding office in the union again, under provisions in the Liberal government's Workplace Relations Act.

From the outset, the AMWU National Council has tacitly encouraged the police and employers to proceed with the charges, as a means of dealing a blow against its factional rivals.

In June last year, within days of a police investigation being launched into the "run through", the AMWU National Council voted to condemn violence in industrial disputes and refused to fund a legal defence if charges were laid. Cameron told the media that those involved in the incident could be stood down from their union positions during the investigation.

Shortly afterwards, when criminal charges were laid against the seven unionists, the national leadership moved to isolate Johnston and prevent any united defence campaign. Based on legal advice from former NSW Labor Attorney General Jeff Shaw, the union strongly advised the seven to seek separate legal representation

even though they were charged with having acted in common. John Speight, who is not a WF member, broke ranks with his co-defendants and opted for a separate legal defence.

Last November, the national leadership cranked up its anti-WF campaign after receiving a letter from Victorian Labor premier Steve Bracks, urging it to crack down on “rogue elements” in the union’s state branch. Japanese restaurant chain Saizeriya had threatened to abandon a \$400 million investment in a new food-processing factory over a protracted demarcation dispute between the Victorian AMWU and the National Union of Workers.

Cameron seized on Bracks’ letter to launch an internal inquiry into Johnston’s conduct, headed by former Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) official Tom McDonald. As BWIU national secretary in the 1980s, McDonald played a central role in enabling the federal and state Labor governments to deregister the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), collaborating with police and government officials to force BLF members to sign up to other unions.

In May this year, obviously encouraged by the AMWU National Council’s stance, the Victorian police laid further serious charges against Johnston and 16 other unionists over the June 2001 incident at Johnston Tiles. They are yet to be committed for trial.

In June, Melbourne magistrate Peter Couzens committed Johnston and three other WF supporters—Pope, Bradley and Danby—to trial in the County Court in October over the protest at Skilled Engineering. He dismissed charges against three of the accused, including Speight, on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

On July 9, the AMWU National Council suspended Johnston from his position as Victorian branch secretary. Cameron claimed that the union’s internal inquiry had uncovered cases of “intimidation and violence” and breaches of union rules by Johnston and his supporters that “were serious enough to warrant his suspension”. Cameron’s comment that “Workers First is not the future of the union” made clear the decision was motivated by factional interests, not Johnston’s alleged misconduct.

The Australian Industry Group (AIG), a major employer organisation covering a large number of car component manufacturers employing AMWU members, immediately praised the suspension. AIG chief executive Bob Herbert attacked Johnston’s “damaging behaviour,” saying: “It’s diabolical for the process of good industrial relations, how Workers First people have behaved.”

Days later, the union announced a further charge of “gross misconduct” against Johnston. On July 16, no doubt based on information leaked by the union leadership, the *Sun-Herald* published a story alleging that the charge involved the sexual harassment of a female union associate.

The following day, Johnston called a rally of about 1,000 workers in Melbourne and denied the charge, claiming the national leadership had coerced the woman into making a statement against him. While not all of those in attendance were WF supporters, the gathering was overwhelmingly hostile to the unprincipled actions of the national leadership and endorsed resolutions demanding Johnston’s reinstatement.

Johnston hit back at the AMWU national leadership by

launching a legal case in the Federal Court against his suspension and to prevent it from deliberating on the charge of “gross misconduct”. On July 22, Justice Mark Weignberg upheld the suspension but then used the opportunity to further involve the police in union affairs. Stating that he “could think of few less satisfactory situations than a collection of national council members—including laymen and factional enemies—judging the allegations against Mr Johnston,” Weignberg ordered that any evidence of sexual harassment be handed to the police.

The factional war has taken place in the midst of moves by the federal government and employers to further crackdown on any industrial action. Over the last 18 months, AMWU members have been involved in a series of limited strikes over new workplace agreements in small car component companies. Because the car industry is organised on the “Just in Time” system, some of the strikes have halted the flow of key components and brought production in the country’s car plants to a standstill.

Even though the strikes were legal under its own Workplace Relations Act, the federal government has seized on the disruption to advance its agenda of sidelining the trade unions. Industrial Relations Minister Tony Abbott attempted to convince car manufacturers to cripple the union by taking legal action against union officials and striking workers for punitive damages.

The AMWU leadership responded by rapidly ending the disputes, one after another, on terms favorable to employers. It then called for a national summit with car manufacturers and other manufacturing employers to “negotiate an industry approach to the sort of problems that have dogged the industry for years.” The unstated purpose was to establish joint mechanisms to suppress even the limited forms of industrial action that are legally permitted.

By targeting the WF faction, even though it was not directly involved in the car component stoppages, Cameron was sending a clear message to employers that the AMWU national leadership was still the best means for imposing the ongoing assault on jobs and working conditions. By taking ruthless action against factional rivals, the union bureaucracy was demonstrating its willingness to use the same methods to suppress the opposition of rank-and-file manufacturing workers to the destruction of their living standards.

The message did not go unheeded. After meetings in July between the unions, car component manufacturers and carmakers, both Ford and Holden, two of the country’s main car producers, backed Cameron’s proposal. Holden’s managing director Peter Hanenberger announced that he was not for a “strategy that takes out a big stick,” adding: “What we’d like to see in the future is consensus.” In other words, major manufacturing employers will, for the time being, continue to use the services of the union to discipline the workforce.



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