

Resignation of “militant” Australian union official contains vital political lessons

Terry Cook, Nick Beams
10 October 2002

In an unexpected move, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Victorian state secretary Craig Johnston has issued an open letter announcing his immediate resignation.

During the past 12 months, Johnston has been engaged in a factional battle against the AMWU national leadership, which has tried to remove him and smash up the Workers First (WF) faction he leads. Founded by a group of minor officials, the faction was elected in 1998 to leading positions in the union’s Victorian state branch. Workers turned to Johnston’s group out of anger at the constant betrayals of the AMWU National Council, which had paved the way for the wholesale destruction of jobs and working conditions across the state’s manufacturing sector.

Johnston’s sudden resignation must come as a profound shock to those workers who hoped Workers First would lead a fight against the pro-business agenda of national secretary Doug Cameron and the national leadership. It therefore deserves serious consideration.

In his resignation letter Johnston proclaims: “My team and I were overwhelmingly elected because the rank and file wanted officials who would have a red hot go, and not bow and scrape to the bosses. I am proud of our record of doing that for our members. It’s because of our record that the bosses have set out to destroy me and wrench control of the branch from the rank and file.”

Having declared his bona fides and the source of the attack against him, one would have thought that Johnston would go on to announce his intention to stay put and fight; that he would appeal to AMWU members to defend their right to elect whatever leadership they saw fit, without interference from the bosses and the union’s national leadership.

Instead, he makes the following extraordinary statement: “I have always tried to do what’s best for the members, and with this in mind I feel I have no choice but to resign, to enable the elected State Council to take the branch back out of the hands of Cameron...”

What are workers to make of this? Cameron and the rest of the leadership wage a sustained campaign to oust Johnston and install their own nominee, so that they can reestablish total control of the Victorian State Council. And Johnson obliges by resigning!

The dispute within the AMWU is not a product of personality conflicts between Cameron and Johnston. Its origins lie in changes in the metal industries. Cameron decided to move against Workers First and break its hold over the Victorian apparatus as part of his perspective of cementing new relations with certain manufacturers,

including the country’s four car producers.

Based on production systems requiring a constant flow of components from their suppliers, these layers of big business are demanding that the union develop the means to rapidly suppress all forms of industrial action, even the most limited. The AMWU National Council therefore has to concentrate the control of every aspect of union organisation in its own hands.

To this end, Cameron and his fellow bureaucrats have resorted to the most unprincipled methods. At precisely the time Johnston and three Workers First supporters face state prosecution on serious charges, the national leadership stepped up its operation against them. Johnston and his supporters have been charged with causing damage to office equipment after leading a run-through of two Melbourne manufacturers’ offices. If found guilty, the unionists face stiff jail terms.

The AMWU leadership has also attempted to frame Johnston, claiming he raped a female union associate in November last year. Using the allegation as a pretext, the National Council suspended the WF leader as state secretary on July 9 and handed the case over to the Victorian police. Cameron’s plan received a set back in September, however, when the police announced they had insufficient evidence to prosecute.

Nevertheless, Johnston has proceeded with his resignation. In his open letter, he appeals to Victorian AMWU members “to vote in subsequent elections” for WF endorsed candidates “against Cameron’s puppets”.

But AMWU members already voted to throw out “Cameron’s puppets” when they supported WF candidates against the national leadership. Why should they follow Johnston’s instructions and vote for another one, when he or she is just as likely to respond to a challenge from Cameron by following suit and throwing in the towel?

Johnston resignation is not simply the product of cowardice and personal weakness. More fundamentally, he and WF have proven incapable of waging any genuine struggle against the AMWU leadership because they offer no alternative program. Moreover, their lack of an alternative perspective is rooted in the very nature and role of the trade unions themselves.

Whether its leadership is regarded as left wing or right wing, moderate or militant, the essential function of a trade union is to organise the sale of the labour power of a particular group of workers. The union’s role is to seek the best price for the sale of that labour power—in the form of wages and other conditions—that

the market will allow. But the essential relations within the market are determined neither by the trade unions nor the employers. They are shaped, rather, by processes originating in the global capitalist economy.

Over the past two decades, the market for the buying and selling of labour power has been fundamentally changed by the globalisation of production. While “globalisation” is often dismissed as a “buzz word” by the various radical groups—such as those that have enthusiastically supported Johnston and his allies—it in fact involves a far-reaching transformation in the very heart of capitalist production.

The essence of capitalist production, whether of potato chips or computer chips, cars or the provision of services, is the extraction of surplus value from the workforce. The source of this surplus value—the basis of all profit—is the difference between the value of labour power the worker sells to capital, received in the form of wages, and the value that the worker’s labour adds in the course of production.

In the past, before sweeping developments in telecommunications and transport enabled the disaggregation of production processes, the extraction of surplus value took place within the confines of a given nation state. The trade unions within that state could apply pressure to employers—either through industrial action or parliamentary legislation—to claw back a certain portion of that surplus value, in the form of improved wages and conditions.

Today, however, the perspective of reforming the national capitalist economy is totally defunct. Surplus value is no longer extracted by capital on a national basis, but on a global scale. Workers in every industry are increasingly part of a production process that stretches across national borders and entire continents.

Corporations can now move production to take advantage of cheaper labour costs, lower tax rates and other government concessions. As a result, the role of the unions has transformed. Instead of pressuring national employers for concessions, their primary function has become disciplining the workforce in order to attract globally mobile capital and investment.

A corresponding transformation has taken place in the role of union officials. In the past, the union apparatus was, in a broad sense, dependent upon the social position of the working class. Now the fortunes of the bureaucracy are entirely bound up with how successfully they can deliver to capital.

Ordinary workers have responded to this transformation with anger and disgust. That is why, for example, the Victorian AMWU workers supported Johnston and Workers First. But they were being duped. Johnston promised a revival of militant trade unionism when the conditions for such a perspective no longer exist. His so-called “militancy” was nothing but a caricature—a series of protest stunts and fiery confrontations with individual employers. Far from advancing workers’ interests, these antics only allowed the employers and the state to intervene with their own provocations.

Moreover, at the same time as vehemently denouncing Cameron and the national leadership, Johnston and his group inevitably began to play a similar role. Within their particular sphere of operations—national-based Victorian manufacturing—they tried to

arrange their own deals.

The basic features of the conflict inside the AMWU conform to a well-worn pattern. This is not the first time workers have thrown their support behind rank-and-file trade union groups, only to see them slavishly capitulate when seriously challenge by the union establishment, or dutifully fall in line once elevated to a leading position.

Ian Jones, the present secretary of the AMWU’s vehicle division, is a case in point. Jones was once the leader of a “left” rank and file faction in the former Vehicle Builders Union. He is now an ardent Cameron supporter and has backed the campaign to remove Johnston.

The former Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) provides perhaps the best example. In its heyday, the BLF was the personification of trade union militancy. Conducting ongoing struggles to force concessions from the construction bosses, it commanded the support of thousands of building workers around the country.

In 1986, the Hawke Labor government, with the support of the peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), moved to deregister the BLF and bust up the union. To the amazement of its members, the BLF leadership rapidly capitulated. Without firing a serious shot, it ordered its members to sign over to another union.

For all its militancy, the BLF proved incapable of challenging the framework of official trade unionism—of mobilising workers in a political struggle against the Labor government and its big business backers. The demise of the BLF marked the death knell of militant syndicalism.

More than 15 years later, it is high time for workers to draw a balance sheet of these bitter experiences. The struggle to defend jobs, wages and conditions cannot be conducted on the basis of the national-reformist perspective of trade unionism. It can only be developed and sustained on the basis of a program that challenges the entire framework of the global capitalist order and fights for the international unification of the working class and genuine social equality. That is the program of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact