

Australian unions guarantee no ban on war materials

Terry Cook
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On March 2, a front-page article in the *Sunday Herald Sun* reported that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) would consider a Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) proposal for bans on the movement of war materials if the US-led assault on Iraq went ahead.

No doubt, the news would have come as a surprise to most workers, since the trade unions have been almost invisible in the mass antiwar movement. Some unions have belatedly issued low-key calls for their members to attend antiwar rallies. No significant union contingents have been seen at the rallies, although tens of thousands of working people have participated.

If the newspaper article created the illusion that the unions were about to take decisive action, this was short-lived. Defence Minister Robert Hill denounced any move to ban war supplies as “appalling” and demanded that Australian Labor Party leader Simon Crean “fix this problem today”. The official reprimand was enough to send union officials scurrying to issue impassioned denials.

VTHC secretary Leigh Hubbard assured Hill the next day that banning war supplies had never been discussed “amongst Victorian unions or amongst national unions”. Any industrial action in relation to the war would be “limited and symbolic in nature,” Hubbard declared. “The union movement has never, and will never, put the safety of either civilians or combatants at risk.”

Hubbard was quickly joined by ACTU president Sharon Burrow. Unions “respected that troops had an obligation to obey orders from the federal government,” she declared. While the ACTU supported the peace movement, “at no time would we oppose food and materials being sent to support troops”.

To make sure there was no doubt, Australian

Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Queensland state secretary David Harrison declared on March 3 that his union was opposed to war on Iraq, but it did not “serve any purpose to try and deprive them (Australian military forces) of the means to do their job”.

Harrison did not care to elaborate on the “job” that the Australian armed forces have been sent to perform. They have been dispatched to bolster a criminal, one-sided assault on a weak and impoverished nation in the interests of the US and Australian ruling elite.

Contrary to Hubbard’s claims that the unions would never endanger the safety of civilians or combatants, ensuring a continuous flow of war materials does precisely that. It will directly aid the Howard government to pursue its predatory war aims and help keep Australian military personnel in the field to kill and be killed.

The rejection by the unions of any action to block war supplies underscores their transformation over the past 20 years into open agencies of big business, without a trace of opposition to its dictates.

In 1967, the Seamens Union of Australia supported rank-and-file seafarers who refused to man ANL-line ships the *Boonaroo* and *Japarit*, which were carrying supplies for Australian troops fighting with US forces against the Vietnamese people. Now the unions are blocking any repetition of even these limited protests.

In the case of the Maritime Union of Australia, its officials are using the war as an argument for maintaining the country’s merchant marine. The union recently made a submission to the Commonwealth’s Sub Defence Committee, warning that the government “may well have to rely on foreign ships crewed by Islamic extremists to support any US-led venture in Iraq”.

The opposition of union bureaucrats to the blocking

of war supplies does not arise out of concern for the safety of military personnel. They openly defend the right of the capitalist state to wage a war of aggression free from any direct challenge by the working class.

The union officials fear that action against the war could converge with the general discontent among working people over the destruction of jobs and social conditions. For these reasons, they have striven to restrict the antiwar movement to limited protest actions, while bolstering illusions that war could be averted through the United Nations or pressure on various governments.

Moreover, the union leaderships accept the discredited pretext used by Washington to launch its onslaught—Iraq’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction”. On February 6, prior to the largest antiwar demonstrations in Australia’s history, the Labor Council of NSW issued a statement calling on Iraq “to fully cooperate with the United Nations resolutions and allow the resumption of weapons inspections”.

The US, with the assistance of Britain and Australia, has invaded Iraq not to find its so-called weapons of mass destruction but to secure control of the country and its oil reserves as part of broader US plans for dominance in the Middle East. The reactionary nature of this war has not suddenly changed with the commencement of hostilities and the sending of Australian troops into battle.

Many times in the past, working people—influenced by the socialist ideal of international class unity—have opposed and disrupted the war plans of their “own” imperialist governments. Following the October 1917 Russian Revolution, English dockworkers refused to load guns onto ships for the use of British forces sent to attempt to crush the first workers’ revolutionary government.

As it becomes increasingly clear that the moribund labour organisations will do nothing to oppose militarism and war, working people will seek independent methods of struggle.

Already workers have begun to disrupt the movement of war materials, supplies and troops. In January, British rail workers in Motherwell refused to man a freight train loaded with military supplies bound for the Persian Gulf. In February, thousands of ordinary people in Italy defied the government and blocked military trains used to carry US forces and military equipment

from a northern Italian base.

A genuine struggle against imperialist war will only take place in direct opposition to the unions, the Labor Party and all other agencies of the political establishment.



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