

Strike at Sydney metal company enters 12th week

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Forty-one employees at metal products manufacturer Morris McMahon have maintained a 24-hour daily picket outside the company's plant in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe for more than eleven weeks. The workers, who began strike action on March 10 to demand higher wages and defend conditions, have defied increasing intimidation, including a large police presence supporting the entry of scabs and legal action by management to restrict picketing.

The mainly women workers, who are paid a paltry \$12 an hour and have not had a substantial wage increase in more than 10 years, rejected a 2 percent pay rise insisting on 10 percent. They also refused to surrender conditions, including a four-day workweek. Under the present arrangement they work a ten-hour day, four days a week allowing a long weekend.

Management wanted to impose a raft of changes, including the introduction of shift work without penalty rates. When workers rejected these proposals and the 2 percent offer, they were told to "take it or leave it", meaning the changes would be introduced with or without their agreement. They responded by joining the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and voting for industrial action. The company reacted to this democratic decision by rejecting the workers' right to a collective agreement and refusing to negotiate with the union.

The Morris McMahon employees have put their faith in the AMWU to act on their behalf and help them establish a decent agreement. While their decision to act collectively is entirely correct, their trust in the union is entirely misplaced.

The struggle of the Morris McMahon workers has broad implications for workers' rights but the AMWU has isolated it to a single enterprise. With the strike now entering its 12th week the union, which is one of the biggest in Australia, has limited its actions to financial support and the mobilisation of some union members and other workers to the picket line. Under conditions of increasing isolation and hardship about 70 strikers have returned to work, leaving just 41 on the picket line.

Moreover, on May 21 the picket was rendered virtually ineffective when the AMWU accepted a Supreme Court order preventing employees standing in front of trucks. This ensured that materials and contracted workers could enter the plant with little trouble and maintain production. The AMWU not only

refused to defy the court order but has not asked other unions to ban the metal products factory or call for wider industrial action by its own members.

This response is not an aberration. While union officials hope to recruit dues paying members, their central goal is to maintain good relations with the employers by demonstrating that the union can provide the best means for realising the employers' aims.

The AMWU, like all other unions, has a long and infamous record of outright collaboration with the manufacturing bosses. One need only ask: How is it possible for companies to establish the levels of exploitation seen at Morris McMahon and other factories, large and small? These conditions did not fall from the sky.

Over the past 15 years, in order to make Australian manufacturers "internationally competitive", the AMWU has assisted successive federal governments and the employers to force manufacturing workers to hand back conditions won over years of bitter struggle.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the AMWU played a key role in enforcing the Accord, a tri-partite agreement between employers, the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Hawke-Keating Labor government. The union ended nationally unified campaigns and accepted enterprise bargaining on a plant-by-plant basis. This atomised industrial struggles and saw workers in small factories abandoned. At one time, the conditions won by large concentrations of manufacturing workers in major enterprises would flow through to those in smaller workshops unable to sustain a struggle on their own.

Enterprise bargaining resulted in a continuous reduction of working conditions in the major industries, which in turn became the basis for imposing ever-greater levels of exploitation in the myriad smaller plants, such as Morris McMahon. The AMWU struck agreements that led to the destruction of demarcation and the introduction of multi-skilling, thus allowing employers to slash thousands of manufacturing jobs. Wage increases, always kept to a minimum, were traded-off for hard-won working conditions. At the same time, the union backed the ever-increasing use of contract labor and the destruction of full-time permanent positions.

In the mid-1990s, the AMWU sabotaged key struggles against outsourcing, thus allowing major companies such as Kellogg, Kraft, ACI and Nestlé's to dismantle their in-house maintenance teams. AMWU national secretary Doug Cameron, who recently addressed the McMahon workers on the benefits of unionism, was at the centre of these betrayals.

More recently in 2001, the union ended a protracted strike at Tristar, a Sydney car component manufacturer, backing away from employees' demands for a company-funded scheme to cover entitlements and cutting a 16 percent pay claim to just 6 percent. Later that year, a similar result was imposed on workers at Maintrain, a private rail maintenance centre in Sydney.

The AMWU sold out another round of disputes in 2002, including a protracted strike by maintenance workers at BHP Steel in Hastings against outsourcing. Qantas maintenance workers fighting for a 6 percent pay rise jeered and booed Cameron when he said they had to accept a 2 percent increase with future wage improvements tied to productivity gains.

In the four years to 2000, 120,000 manufacturing jobs were wiped out nationally. The AMWU has mounted no serious struggle against job losses or factory closures but directed workers, instead, to demand increased redundancy payments. Major workshops once employing thousands of metal workers have been closed, with the AMWU assisting employers, to impose "orderly closures".

Given this history, it is little wonder that AMWU national secretary Doug Cameron avoided any reference to past disputes when he recently addressed workers at the Morris McMahon picket. Instead, he pointed to the waterfront dispute in 1998 between the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and Patrick Stevedoring to promote illusions in the unions.

Cameron claimed the waterfront struggle was a victory for maritime workers because the union had defeated the company's attempt to deunionise its operations. "The MUA is here to stay," he declared. While Cameron's speech was cheered on the picket, workers should carefully examine what were the results of this dispute.

The maritime struggle erupted when Patrick Stevedoring sacked its entire workforce and replaced them with non-union labor. The offensive was backed by the Howard government, which wanted sweeping attacks on working conditions to drive up productivity on the waterfront as part of its industrial reform agenda. Prime Minister Howard wanted to inflict a decisive defeat on waterfront workers to set the climate for similar attacks on other sections of the working class.

Angered by the assault, which saw hooded thugs with guard dogs used to drive waterfront workers from the workplace, hundreds of people daily joined MUA picket lines. The dispute was eventually ended when the government was threatened with charges for breaching the discrimination provisions of its own industrial laws by conspiring with Patrick to exclude union labor. Patrick then decided to negotiate a deal with the union.

Despite victory claims by union officials, the settlement between the MUA, Patrick and the Howard government was a monumental betrayal of the maritime workers. It resulted in the destruction of 625 permanent jobs—almost half the workforce—the elimination of a raft of working conditions and the outsourcing of nearly 200 non-core maintenance, cleaning and security jobs, previously performed by MUA members. Crane lifting rates were driven up from 18 to 25 containers per hour, in line with the target set by the Howard Liberal government, but with only half the manning levels.

This set a new benchmark throughout the waterfront and led almost immediately to the destruction of 520 jobs, or almost half the workforce, at P&O as well as massive cuts to working conditions.

Morris McMahon employees need to look beyond Cameron's verbal posturing and undertake a serious examination of this history and its implications for the entire working class. While it is impossible to fight the attacks of the employers and the government as isolated individuals, workers cannot advance if they remain trapped in organisations that collaborate with the employers and impose their demands on the workforce.

The struggle at Morris McMahon can only be taken forward by drawing the lessons of past betrayals and opposing the class collaborationist policies of the unions. This means acting independently of the union, and turning out to mobilise the support of other sections of the working class that are facing the same attacks.

Above all else it is necessary to understand that the fight at Morris McMahon is a political struggle against the pro-market policies of the Howard Liberal government. What is happening at this factory is part of an assault being carried out against the entire working class to continuously drive down working conditions and impose ever-greater levels of exploitation.

To fight against these policies workers must turn to a political perspective that seeks to unite the working class, in Australia and internationally, through the building and development of a genuine anti-capitalist political party, dedicated to the uncompromising defence of their interests and the fight for socialism. That party is the Socialist Equality Party, and its daily organ is the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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