Australian unions grovel before rightwing media campaign

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If a further demonstration were needed of the subservience of the unions to the dictates of big business it was provide this month by the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union. Within the course of a few days, both organisations capitulated without a murmur to a rightwing media campaign attacking the right of workers to picket and clearing the ground for even tougher restrictions on any form of industrial action.

The episode began when the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed on July 1 that it was in possession of videotape showing the national secretary of the construction division of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) John Sutton being "violent" on a picket line on March 19.

Sutton had attended the "community picket" outside metal items manufacturer Morris McMahon in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe as part of a CFMEU contingent alongside officials from other unions. The factory, until the end of June, was the site of a 17-week long dispute by a small group of mainly migrant female workers fighting in defence of working conditions against a particularly iniquitous employer. Picketing by the McMahon workers had already been hamstrung by legal action taken by the well-healed lawyer-owner of the plant.

During the dispute, the company hired and trained casual workers to replace the strikers. The videotape, from one of the company's surveillance cameras used to spy on the strikers, showed Sutton spitting on one car and pouring a cup of "clear liquid" on another as McMahon managers drove through the picket. Sutton also allegedly kicked the cars.

The issue was eagerly taken up and further sensationalised by other media outlets with extracts from the video duly featured in evening television news programs. The *Sydney Morning Herald* itself ran a particularly nasty little piece by its industrial editor Brad Norington entitled, "Working Class hero as spitting, kicking vandal". Of course, picket busting by management was completely ignored.

Having at first refused to comment on the incident, by the end of July 2 a totally contrite Sutton called a media conference to apologise "unreservedly" for his actions. In a sickening display of abject groveling he declared: "My behavior on this occasion was unacceptable and irresponsible."

He continued: "In my 24 years as a union official and as national secretary of the CFMEU I have continually stated my belief that workers and unionists should never respond inappropriately to any situation, no matter what the provocation. The fact that I did so in these circumstances is a matter of profound regret to me."

The Howard government immediately seized on the opportunity provided by Sutton's response to push ahead with its draconian "industrial relations" agenda. Federal Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott declared the incident a "clear breach of the criminal law" that "illustrates that we still have a serious problem with respect for the rule of law amongst significant sections of the union movement". He called on police to charge Sutton, and the official has now been summoned to appear in court.

At the same time Abbott launched a new offensive for the government's proposed building industry legislation to be passed by the Senate. The legislation will create a special policing agency—to be known as the Australian Building and Construction Commission. It will be able to investigate, bring prosecutions, compel witnesses to testify and enforce judgments as well as having extensive powers to police major

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building sites.

Spooked by the media and the government, by July 10 the CFMEU had officially barred Sutton from speaking on behalf of the union and handed his public duties over to national general secretary John Maitland. There were even suggestions among the union tops that the erring official resign. The CFMEU's actions brought howls of approval from the media pack, again led by Norington, who penned another article entitled "Union puts picket thug on sideline".

Sutton's humiliating public mea culpa, his highly publicised disciplining and the police charges, however, were not enough. Within just two weeks the incident had been elevated to the national level, involving the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body.

When reports of the videotape were first aired ACTU secretary Greg Combet publicly chastised Sutton, declaring: "His behavior cannot be condoned." By July 16, Combet had called a meeting of senior national union officials to impose a new set of "guidelines" regulating conduct on picket lines. The guidelines included the use of union "crowd marshals", a disciplined adherence to non-violence and cooperation with the police in "handling difficult situations".

The guidelines are aimed, not at controlling errant union officials, but at telegraphing to employers the ACTU's willingness to clamp down even more ruthlessly on any action by workers that could conceivably cut across the drive for increased productivity and profit.

Not a single union official had the fortitude to publicly defend the legitimate right to picket or to oppose the use of scab labour and strike busting. Nor did anyone point out that whatever "violence" may have occurred was the direct result of the actions of company management, that could have resulted in serious injury or even death. To a man they accommodated themselves to the real agenda behind the media campaign—by the so-called "liberal" *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Murdoch media alike—for further "industrial reform."

The unions' response to the McMahon incident is a microcosm of their broader role. Over the past seven years, workers have been increasingly straight-jacketed by the raft of industrial laws introduced by the Howard government—including secondary boycott measures making illegal any solidarity action by workers in industries not directly involved in a strike—as well as laws restricting all strike action to an officially recognised bargaining period for new enterprise work agreements. But the employers remain free to take legal action to restrict picketing and to hire goons and security guards to spy on, intimidate, harass and even assault workers.

The Howard government's ability to implement its attacks on the working class is not a sign of some inherent strength. It has been entirely dependent on the passivity and compliance of the unions and the Labor Party. The façade of invincibility promoted by the media and utilised by the unions themselves to suppress and intimidate workers will rapidly evaporate at the first sign of a broad movement of the working class fighting in defence of its own independent interests.

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