

Australia: Workers First union leader plea bargains for suspended sentence

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Last month, former Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Victorian state secretary Craig Johnston pleaded guilty in the Melbourne County Court to charges of affray, criminal damage and verbal assault. A much more serious charge of “threat to kill” was eventually dropped after the former union leader literally threw himself at the mercy of the court and entered a behind-the-scenes plea-bargaining deal. Johnston received a one-year suspended sentence and was fined more than \$50,000. If he re-offends during the next three years he can be sent immediately to jail.

The extensive charges arose from a union protest stunt organised by Johnston during a dispute in June 2001. Some 29 workers had been callously sacked at Johnson Tiles in Melbourne and replaced with casual labour.

In the course of the dispute, neither Johnston nor any of his fellow bureaucrats attempted to mobilise a broad-based campaign against the sackings, although the basis for one certainly existed. Instead, he led a number of union officials and members in a “run through” of the premises of Johnson Tiles and of the labour-hire company, Skilled Engineering, overturning and damaging factory and office equipment.

Some months later, six union officials were charged with riot, affray, aggravated burglary, criminal damage and unlawful assembly over the incident at Skilled Engineering. The following year, 12 unionists were similarly charged over the Johnson Tiles “run through”. Subsequent plea-bargaining saw all charges—except unlawful assembly—dropped against the other defendants. However, the serious charges against Johnston, carrying a maximum 25 years jail, remained.

On the day of Johnston’s sentencing an estimated 8,000 workers gathered outside the court in response to a call by his support group to rally and demand the dropping of all charges. Many of these workers had defied threats of disciplinary action by their employers to attend and most would not have been aware of the plea-bargaining that had already taken place.

Addressing the gathering after his sentencing, Johnston tried to present the outcome—a lighter than expected sentence—as a “victory for the cause of fighting for workers and the rank and file” and “a victory for militant unionism”. His claim is utterly preposterous.

In reality, Johnston’s sentencing marks the final stage in an

almost three-year long offensive by sections of the manufacturing employers and the National Council of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) to bust-up the Workers First (WF) faction in the union’s Victorian branch. Presenting itself as a militant alternative to the openly class collaborationist AMWU national leadership, and its cohorts in the Victorian state apparatus, WF was able to capture prominent positions in the state branch in 1998. Johnston, the faction’s principal leader, won the position of state secretary.

While Johnston and other WF officials at no time advanced any genuine alternative to the national leadership, they did win the support of thousands of discontented and disgruntled workers in key sectors of Victoria’s manufacturing industry. These workers had turned to WF looking for a vehicle to fight the employers’ onslaught on their conditions and to combat the decades-long betrayals of the union’s nation leadership—which had led to the wholesale destruction of jobs and working conditions.

Powerful sections of employers and investors, along with Victorian Labor State Premier Steve Bracks, concerned at the turn of events, urged the AMWU national leadership to take action. In response, the union launched a witchhunt against WF. Johnston was hauled before an internal union inquiry on charges of “gross misconduct” and suspended as Victorian AMWU state secretary.

Within this context, the “run through” stunt at Johnson Tiles and Skilled Engineering was a gift to the employers and the AMWU national leadership. It opened the road for legal action against Johnston and his supporters, while at the same time disorienting sections of AMWU members who, although they opposed the unprincipled operation by Cameron, rejected WF’s mindless radical tactics.

Johnston’s antics did nothing to advance the fight against the sackings. In the final analysis, they constituted a desperate attempt on the part of WF to bolster its flagging reputation as a militant alternative to the Cameron leadership. The faction’s standing had waned considerably following the miserable outcome of a series of enterprise bargaining campaigns for new work contracts. The effect of the campaigns was to maintain the division of manufacturing workers on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis, deliver low wage outcomes and continue the

trend of trading off working conditions. Moreover, they failed to challenge the drive to casualisation.

Johnston and WF consciously avoided making a broad class appeal over the dispute at Johnson Tiles because they feared any campaign against casualisation would win a widespread response throughout the working class that could rapidly get out of their control.

Johnston's sentencing last month marked the final disciplining of Worker First. It was designed to send a clear message to all manufacturing workers that not even the slightest opposition to the employers' agenda would be tolerated. And it is indisputable that the operation against WF has succeeded.

In late 2002, Johnston bowed before the demands of the National Council and resigned his union position. At the same time, all those union officials who once claimed adherence to the WF faction have now made their peace with the AMWU national leadership and are actively carrying out its agenda. In fact, despite promising their supporters that WF would contest the position of state secretary, its officials agreed to accept AMWU National Council nominee Dave Oliver in exchange for keeping their positions in the union apparatus.

Victoria's Chamber of Commerce and Industry head Neil Coulsen recently expressed the employers' satisfaction with Johnston's sentence. Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, he said the result sent "a very clear message to unions" that if they wanted to negotiate with employers "they have to behave according to certain standards". In other words, union officials must unconditionally accept corporate dictates, and impose them on their memberships, if they wish to remain "in the loop".

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The abject capitulation of Workers First to the campaign waged against it, despite the fact that it held key union positions and had considerable rank and file support, demonstrates yet again the bankruptcy of a perspective based on narrow trade union politics, no matter how militant its adherents may claim to be.

WF's response, rather than politically educating the workers about the real nature of the struggle they confronted, has only served to disorient and demoralise them, while strengthening the hand of the employers, the government and the AMWU national leadership.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Socialist Equality Party have unequivocally condemned the dirty operation against Workers First and the cowardly and reprehensible intrigues of Cameron and the national AMWU leadership. But we have also continued to warn workers that, because WF shares the same fundamental political perspective as its rivals—the subordination of its members to the framework dictated by the profit system—it would prove incapable of mounting a serious defence of workers' rights—or even its own.

As WSWS has pointed out, WF's capitulation is not simply the result of the cowardice or personal weaknesses of its leading figures. It is rooted in the very nature of trade unions themselves, whose principal function is to organise the sale of the labour power of workers for wages and other concessions under prevailing market conditions, and then to enforce the deals struck with employers.

But the globalisation of production, along with sweeping developments in telecommunications and transport, has fundamentally changed the conditions under which unions bargain. If companies don't receive what they want, they can relocate production to areas offering lower labor costs and bigger tax breaks.

These processes have undermined all national-based perspectives. No longer can the unions squeeze concessions from the employers through industrial or parliamentary pressure. Instead, they have become transformed into agencies striving to continually lower wages and conditions, thus enabling the employers to achieve "international competitiveness" and maintain production in Australia.

This is why, on the basis of its nationalist outlook, WF could mount no serious fight against casualisation. The turn to casual and contract labor is itself driven by the need of corporations in every part of the world to create a pool of cheap, flexible labour, tied entirely to their immediate production needs. In Australia, more than one in every four workers is now employed as a casual, the second highest rate in the world after Spain.

A genuine struggle in defence of well-paid, secure jobs can only be organised and sustained to the degree that workers consciously identify themselves as part of an international class and recognise that their interests are irreconcilably opposed to those of capital. Above all else, an independent political movement of the working class must be forged that fights for internationalism and the complete reorganisation of society along truly socialist and egalitarian lines.

See Also:

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