Australia: former union official Craig Johnston jailed for nine months

Terry Cook (SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW)
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The decision on August 27 by the Victorian Supreme Court of Appeal to jail former Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Victorian branch secretary, Craig Johnston, is a warning of the kind of industrial relations regime being demanded by powerful corporate interests in Australia.

In a surprise move, three appeal court judges overturned an earlier suspended jail sentence handed down by Judge Joe Gullaci in the Melbourne County Court, and imprisoned Johnston for nine months.

Significantly, Johnston is the first union official to be jailed since the 1983 three-month incarceration of Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) national secretary Norm Gallagher on long-standing contempt charges. Gallagher's jailing paved the way for the eventual federal deregistration and smashing of the BLF in 1986—part of the Hawke government's agenda of disciplining militant sections of workers as a precondition for its assault on the social position of the working class as a whole.

In May, Johnston received a one-year suspended sentence after he pleaded guilty to charges of affray, criminal damage and verbal assault in exchange for the dropping of a "threat to kill" charge that carried a maximum penalty of 25 years jail.

The charges arose from a union protest in June 2001, when Johnston and 17 union officials and workers ran through the premises of Johnson Tiles and labour-hire company Skilled Engineering in the course of a dispute over casualisation.

The tile company had callously sacked 29 regular workers and replaced them with casual labour supplied by Skilled. The situation was inflamed further when Skilled sent the replacement labour through a picket line outside Johnson Tiles.

The amazing array of charges that followed the so-called "run through"—including the absurd "threat to kill" charge—was entirely out of proportion to what actually took place. They were clearly designed to conjure up a false picture that Johnston and his followers had been involved in extreme forms of violence.

The media, for its part, beat up the "run through," presenting it as a "storming" of the premises and a "violent rampage". While providing no real evidence, journalists claimed that office staff had been "terrorised" during the incidents. In fact, the protest resulted in damage to some factory and office equipment, but no staff or managerial personnel were touched or injured at either of the companies.

In all, it was alleged that the stunt had caused about $43,000 worth of damage. Johnston has already been ordered to pay $44,500 compensation to the two companies on top of a $10,000 fine. On August 3, his lawyer Rob Stary rightly pointed out that the jailing sentence "was wildly out of proportion" to anything previously handed down for offences relating to political protests that involved occupying premises and damage to office equipment.

Neither Johnston nor the AMWU Workers First faction that he led have ever posed a real threat to the pro-market agenda of big business. Nevertheless, his jailing is designed to send a very sharp warning to more militant sections of workers that not even the slightest opposition to the employers' agenda will be tolerated. The message to union officials is that, if they want to remain "relevant" they will have to unconditionally impose corporate dictates on their memberships.

While sections of the corporate elite believed that the earlier sentence had achieved the desired result—Workers First was all but defunct in the Victorian AMWU and Johnston was barred from holding union office—others insisted it did not go far enough. A jailing was needed to ram the message home.

The latter view was advanced most stridently in the pages of the *Australian*, the flagship publication of media mogul Rupert Murdoch. In line with his union busting and rabidly anti-worker activities overseas, Murdoch has been in the forefront of demanding sweeping "industrial relations reform." The aim is to stamp out what remains of workers' industrial rights in order to deepen the ongoing government and employer assault on jobs and working conditions.

Frothing over the May suspended sentence the *Australian* ran a particularly vicious editorial entitled "new-age penalty for dark-age thug". Blasting Johnston and Workers First for causing "industrial mayhem" and for having "scared off hundreds of millions of dollars in investment" the editorial concluded: "Mr Johnston's actions were a throwback to a more brutal and confrontational time. Luckily for him, his punishment is anything but."

The message was not wasted on the Victorian Office of Prosecutions, which had already described the earlier sentence

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as “manifestly inadequate”. An appeal was duly mounted. For the witch-hunt to proceed, the only other ingredient needed was an assurance by the AMWU national leadership that it would continue to refuse to support Johnston, and would derail any action by workers to defend him.

That assurance came in an article posted on the AMWU website in May, reporting AMWU national secretary Doug Cameron condemning, “the criminal tactics used by Craig Johnston”, that “undermine smart effective unionism” and declaring “the Workers First experiment has failed and should, must, be confined to the dustbin of history”.

On July 21, the AMWU National Council expelled Johnston from the union on nine counts of what it termed “impropriety”. The process was, by any standard, a kangaroo court, with Johnston unable to attend and found guilty in absentia.

The union charges against Johnston—including one of sexual harassment of a female colleague—arose from an internal union inquiry initiated against him by the AMWU National Council in October 2002, even as he faced state prosecution over the “run-through”.

The move saw Johnston suspended from his state secretary position—part of a dirty factional operation by Cameron and in line with demands by big business that Workers First be completely shut down. The inquiry was initiated at the behest of Victorian Premier Steve Bracks, who, speaking for major investors in Victoria, urged Cameron to “crack down on rogue elements” in the union’s Victorian state branch.

The allegations against Johnston lacked any real substance. The Victorian police at the time declined to prosecute him, finding there was insufficient evidence from the union inquiry—including in relation to sexual misconduct—to proceed. The vendetta against him can only be understood in the context of the increasingly ruthless drive for “international competitiveness” on the part of corporate Australia.

From 1998, Johnston and Workers First captured key positions in the Victorian state branch of the AMWU, after attracting the support of thousands of discontented workers in key industrial sectors. These workers were looking for a vehicle to fight the employers’ ongoing attacks on jobs and working conditions and the decades-long betrayals of the union’s national leadership and its supporters in the state branch.

Workers First’s success caused concern among many manufacturing employers. Most alarmed were those in areas based on production systems requiring a constant flow of components from their suppliers, as well as those who wanted to institute work practices free of even the most minimal impediments, including any associated with union bargaining procedures.

Pressure was placed on the AMWU National Council to concentrate control of every aspect of the union’s apparatus in its own hands and to destroy Workers First.

Despite the open character of the AMWU campaign, Johnston and Workers First refused to mobilise manufacturing workers against it. In the course of the dispute at Johnson Tiles, they consciously avoided making a broad class appeal, because they feared any campaign against casualisation would win a response among significant sections of workers that could rapidly get out of their control.

Instead, from its very inception, Workers First attempted to ingratiate itself with sections of the Victorian-based employers by restraining the struggles of the manufacturing workers it purported to represent. This increasingly undermined its base of support. In these conditions, the run-through amounted to a desperate attempt on the part of Workers First to bolster its flagging reputation as a militant alternative to the Cameron leadership. But the stunt played directly into the hands of the AMWU national office and the employers, opening the road for legal action against Johnston and Workers First. Most importantly, the experience served to disorient important sections of workers and created a dangerous precedent for further state provocations.

Johnston and Workers First have proven incapable of mounting any serious defence of workers rights, including their own, not because of cowardice or personal weakness, but because they share the same narrow, nationalist, trade union perspective as their rivals—the subordination of the working class to the framework dictated by the profit system.

Despite our well-known political differences with Johnston and Workers First, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have, from the beginning, denounced the state-sponsored witch-hunt that has been waged against them. We call for Johnston’s immediate release from jail and the unconditional reinstatement of his union membership.

To those workers who turned to Workers First only to be led up a blind alley, we say: study the international socialist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. It is only on the basis of such a perspective that a mass political movement of the working class will be developed capable of challenging the renewed assault on jobs, working conditions and basic rights.

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