

Australia: Unions isolate locked-out Boeing workers

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Engineering workers locked out by Boeing Australia at the Williamtown air force base near Newcastle have been left on a picket line for months by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

The Boeing workers, who are employed under common law work contracts to maintain RAAF F/A-18 Hornet fighter jets, turned to the AWU in November 2004 after becoming frustrated by the company's continued refusal to negotiate new work conditions. Around 47 out of 81 workers at the site joined the union.

The engineers were locked out after imposing work bans as part of a campaign for better working conditions, including an allowance for working inside the planes' fuel tanks. They set up a picket on June 1 this year. Since then, the 130,000-strong AWU has ensured the dispute remained isolated to the Williamtown facility.

The union has not organised any industrial support from workers at other Boeing sites, or from other sections of workers. Demoralised and financially pressed, many of the engineering workers have over the past six months returned to work on the management's terms. Only 27 of those originally locked out remain on the picket line, which is largely ineffective.

Far from pulling out all stops to fight Boeing's attacks, the AWU has been using the dispute to promote a campaign being conducted by the ACTU and Labor Party against the Howard government's new industrial relations (IR) laws.

The ACTU campaign has nothing to do with defending workers' rights and conditions. For decades, the unions have been negotiating away working conditions and jobs in a series of enterprise bargaining agreements. Rather, the campaign is aimed at

persuading the employers and the government to maintain the unions as bargaining agencies within the framework of an arbitrated industrial relations system.

This is why the AWU has brought to the centre of the Boeing dispute the demand for a union-negotiated collective agreement and why it continually attempts to push the dispute into the Industrial Relations Commission. If the company does eventually decide to negotiate, the union will do what it has done in every other dispute—strike an agreement on the employers' terms.

Over the months, the AWU has used the Boeing dispute in a series of publicity stunts designed to further the unions' campaign against the new IR laws. Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley made a flying visit to the picket line where, in front of media cameras, he handed over the paltry donations collected from his parliamentary colleagues.

Beazley's visit to striking workers—a rare event for a Labor leader—was driven by a definite political agenda. Together with the ACTU, Beazley has worked to steer the widespread opposition to the IR laws, evident in massive national demonstrations last month, behind a campaign to elect a Labor government in 2007.

A Labor government, however, would not act in the interests of workers at Boeing or anywhere else. Beazley does not object to stripping away workers' hard-won conditions but believes that this is best achieved, and workers' opposition suppressed, through the arbitration system with the unions working closely with a Labor government.

While in power from 1983 to 1996, Labor, through a series of accords with the ACTU, made huge inroads into the social position of the working class, enabling employers to slash wages, working conditions and jobs. Significantly, at the Boeing picket line, Beazley

explicitly appealed to the company's management to "allow this [dispute] to go to arbitration".

Another highly-publicised stunt was a trip by ACTU president Sharan Burrow and AWU federal secretary Bill Shorten, together with a number of the picketers, to the United States. The declared purpose was to put "Boeing on notice" and to "join forces" with 18,000 Boeing machinists on strike for a new collective work agreement.

The Australian union bureaucrats, however, avoided making any appeal to the US strikers for a common front to fight the company. Their discussions were confined mainly to their counterparts in the AFL-CIO and International Association of Machinists (IAM) bureaucracy.

On their return, Shorten and Burrow declared that the AFL-CIO had pledged its support for Boeing workers in Australia. But the AFL-CIO and its affiliates, like their counterparts in Australia, do not even back their own members or other sections of workers in dispute, let alone lend international support.

With the blessing of the AFL-CIO, the IAM recently ordered its members to cross picket lines at Northwest Airlines manned by striking members of the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA). The IAM allowed its members to take over some of the strikers' work and attempted to cut a deal with Northwest to hand over AMFA jobs permanently.

The Williamstown Boeing dispute was highlighted at the unions' anti-IR laws rally in Sydney in November with a march to the company's Australian headquarters. The marchers, however, were told to restrict support to making donations and writing to local MPs to get Boeing to negotiate.

Much of the money collected at the rally is being used to fund the AWU's high-profile TV and local media advertisements featuring the Boeing dispute. The ads do not appeal to the working class to actively support the Boeing workers but for Prime Minister John Howard to intervene into the dispute.

Howard, however, made clear earlier in parliament and to the media that the government backs the company, saying Boeing was completely within its rights to lock out its workforce and to refuse to collectively bargain.

In fact, Boeing has used workplace relations laws introduced by Howard in 1996 which strengthen

employers' right to lock out workers and impose individual contracts. The government's new IR laws, just rammed through parliament in the face of widespread popular opposition, go even further in attacking workers' rights.

Throughout the Boeing dispute, the AWU and the ACTU have repeatedly promoted the message that the only way for workers to defend their conditions and rights was to join a union, as the Boeing workers had done.

The Boeing dispute, however, testifies to the opposite. The dispute not only reveals the unions' impotency and treachery, but demonstrates that to defend wages, working conditions and jobs requires a campaign in complete opposition to the unions, which function as nothing more than the means to impose the dictates of employers.



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