

Australian Workers Union washes its hands of Boeing workers

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The Australian Workers Union (AWU) leadership breathed a sigh of relief when the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission (NSWIRC) earlier this month decided to ignore a federal ruling that the state body had no jurisdiction to arbitrate a protracted dispute involving 25 Boeing engineers. The workers, who service F/A-18 jet fighters at the Williamstown airforce base near Newcastle, were locked out last June after imposing work bans in support of better pay and conditions.

The AWU had urged the engineers on February 19 to lift their picket line and pin their hopes on the NSWIRC after it ruled that it had power to hear the case. Shortly after the workers filed back into work, however, Boeing obtained an injunction in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to block the NSW hearing, arguing that the engineers were employed under federally-registered common law work agreements.

The NSWIRC decision to defy the federal ruling has been hailed by the AWU as a “positive” step for the engineers. Nothing could be further from the truth. The NSWIRC case had only ever been an excuse to shut down a dispute that the AWU had come to regard as an annoying burden. The state commission’s decision to proceed simply saved the AWU bureaucrats from explaining why their plan had backfired so quickly.

A comment on March 4 in the *Australian*, which backed Boeing to the hilt throughout the dispute, summed up the role of the union and its federal secretary Bill Shorten. “For Shorten,” the newspaper declared, “the Boeing dispute has become a lead-weight in his saddlebag.... The saving grace for Shorten of the brief intervention of the NSW commission was that it gave him justification to recommend an end to the strike.”

The AWU has in fact dumped the 25 engineers, who now find themselves in a worse position than when they were first locked out. Boeing has not conceded a single demand for improved conditions and bonuses. The company continues to refuse to negotiate a collective agreement. It has openly stated it will not accept, and will challenge, any ruling made by the NSWIRC.

Not only are the 25 workers still on their old common law agreements, but they have been forced to undergo “retraining” in safety procedures. The retraining is designed to intimidate and raises the possibility of victimisation, including dismissal, if individuals are not deemed up to scratch. As one worker pointed out, many of those being “retrained” wrote much of the site safety policies. No such requirement was placed on temporary workers hired during the lockout.

From the outset, the AWU and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) have cynically exploited the determined stand by Boeing workers for their own ends. The dispute erupted as the Howard government was preparing sweeping new industrial relations (IR) legislation, slashing workers’ conditions and basic rights.

The impact on workers was never the concern of the unions, which for decades have negotiated enterprise agreements that surrender hard-won conditions and jobs. Their primary worry was that the legislation strengthened the ability of employers to enforce non-union work contracts and abolished the old arbitration system, which enshrined the unions as labour bargaining agencies.

After entering into the Boeing dispute in November 2004, the AWU quickly made a union-negotiated collective agreement, as opposed to individual contracts, the central demand. The union then featured

the picket in the ACTU's anti-IR laws campaign, which, despite widespread opposition to the new legislation, consisted of limited protests and advertising to maintain the arbitration system.

Throughout the protracted dispute, the AWU provided just enough financial support to keep workers on the picket line, but ensured that it remained isolated. Hiding behind secondary boycott laws that prohibit solidarity strikes, the union refused to call out workers at other Boeing plants or other sections of its 130,000 strong membership.

Demoralised and suffering severe financial hardship, almost half of the 47 men originally locked out gradually drifted back to work on the company's terms.

Federal AWU secretary Shorten also had a strong personal motivation for his high-profile involvement. At the time, he was challenging in a preselection contest for a safe federal Labor seat and was looking to gain some kudos as a champion of workers' rights.

After the IR legislation was pushed through last November, the ACTU quickly called off further demonstrations, announcing it would now campaign for a Labor government at the next elections due in 2007. By this stage, the Boeing picket was no longer of much use. Shorten ended media advertisements featuring the locked-out engineers and sought the assistance of the NSW Labor government to bring the case to the NSW industrial court.

Even if it were to win office in 2007, Labor would not act to defend the Boeing workers or any other section of the working class. At both the federal and state levels, Labor governments have carried out the dictates of big business in undermining workers' rights. Howard's legislation simply continues what was begun under the previous Hawke and Keating Labor governments, with the assistance of the unions.

The decision to shut down the Boeing dispute is sharp warning that the trade unions will do nothing to defend workers who will inevitably face new attacks on jobs, wages and conditions under the new IR laws, due to come into force next week.



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