

Australia: Riot police attack sacked transport workers

A WSWS reporting team
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A state Labor government sent riot police to attack and disperse sacked trucking company workers in Sydney on Wednesday. The workers' only "offence" was to demand their unpaid entitlements from their employer, McArthur Express, which suddenly went into liquidation and shut its doors this week without any notice.

Two workers were arrested and two female partners of sacked workers, one pregnant and the other a 50-year-old grandmother, were subjected to physical violence. Tina Allen, who is due to give birth in nine weeks, was shoved and manhandled, while Jackie Moore was thrown to the ground and suffered cuts to her hand.

More than 30 police officers, including riot squad personnel, the dog squad and undercover detectives, were mobilised after a group of workers entered the locked McArthur Express depot at Seven Hills to seek information and termination documents from the company. Asked by security guards to leave the premises, workers complied and then began a peaceful five-hour protest outside the gates.

As soon as a worker tried to stop a truck leaving the depot, however, he was tackled to the ground and held in a chokehold by an undercover cop, wearing casual clothes, who had been mingling in the crowd. When Jackie Moore instinctively went to his aid, without knowing the assailant was a police officer, she was grabbed and pushed backwards by riot police.

Her adult son, Andrew Moore, was arrested when he crossed the road to help his mother. He was later charged with "intimidating a police officer" and resisting arrest. The worker who was originally attacked was arrested for "affray" and resisting arrest. Both were later released on bail—on condition that they stay 100 metres away from the premises—and face Blacktown Court on October 17.

Nearly 700 workers nationally, including almost 500 at Seven Hills, suddenly lost their jobs on Monday when McArthur Express was placed in receivership by banks, including Westpac. Workers arrived for work as normal, only to be told that the company had folded.

It soon emerged that many workers were actually employed by offshore labour-hire companies. Superannuation payments had not been made for up to eight years. Workers were told there was little likelihood that unpaid wages, leave entitlements, redundancy payments and other amounts owing would be forthcoming—because the banks and other secured creditors were legally first in line.

Many workers face dire financial consequences. One young worker, Nuku Vunisina, 17, told the WSWS he had lost his first-ever job, after just a year and five months. Because his father also worked for McArthur Express, they would have trouble paying their rent and putting food on the table. "We don't have any money now; we are depending on our relatives. It's shocking, you don't expect to lose your job, just like that. There was no need for the riot squad. We were just trying to get our separation certificates."

A truck driver, Steve Gauci, said he stood to lose tens of thousands of dollars. Just a month earlier, the company had encouraged him to become a sub-contractor, borrowing \$80,000 for a semi-trailer. Not only had he lost his income but could now lose his house. He said he had bought the truck as his only hope of escaping from working 14 hours a day in two jobs to support his wife and baby daughter. Until his wife became pregnant, they had depended on two wages to live and pay their mortgage.

The precise circumstances behind the liquidation of McArthur Express are still unclear. But workers said the owners, members of the McArthur family, had protected their own assets, reputed to run into millions of dollars.

One experienced driver, Harry Bayliss, who had worked for the company for 15 years, said the company's collapse was part of the ongoing concentration of the transport industry in the hands of giant firms, such as Toll Holdings. The result was relentless price- and cost-cutting, worsened by soaring fuel prices.

He said the police action showed that neither the state Labor government nor the federal Liberal government had any concern for workers. "It doesn't matter which one is in power, there is no difference whatsoever".

The deployment of the riot squad came just three weeks after a massive police mobilisation against protestors at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Sydney. It underscores the fact that the real thrust of such repressive measures is directed against ordinary working people, not "terrorists". It also reveals the level of nervousness in official circles at the slightest sign of any mobilisation of workers to fight sackings and attacks on conditions.

According to Transport Workers Union (TWU) official Mark Crosdale, McArthur Express workers are potentially owed an aggregate of \$1.5 million. But the union has isolated them, refusing to organise other TWU members in support, or to take up any fight to defend the jobs.

Crosdale told the 40 or so workers who turned up for a union meeting yesterday that the only action they could take was to appeal to the Howard government for assistance under its General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS).

Crosdale described GEERS as "not perfect, far from it, but better than nothing". In reality, GEERS is a discretionary fund, and the government is not legally liable to pay anything. Workers who lost their jobs when the Ansett airline collapsed in 2001 were denied payments for more than three years. Even when redundancy payments are made, they are capped at eight weeks pay, and no superannuation entitlements are covered.

When the WSWS asked Crosdale if the union would ask other members to take industrial action to defend the jobs and entitlements of the McArthur workers, he rejected the very idea, claiming it would be impossible under the federal government's "WorkChoices" industrial relations legislation. When we asked whether the TWU would call for statewide action to oppose the Labor government's use of riot police against sacked workers, he dismissed the suggestion out of hand.

Together with the rest of the union movement, the TWU has long accepted the right of employers to carry out mass sackings at will, and worked to dissipate rank-and-file

resistance. It has also co-existed with the type of corporate restructuring undertaken by McArthur to avoid any liability for retrenchments, with the union making only occasional, futile appeals to the federal government for measures to prevent such scams.

Jackie Moore spoke to the WSWS about the police attack on the sacked workers. "It was all peaceful, then the security guard called the police, who called the riot squad and the dog squad. We were shocked when we saw the riot squad arriving. We asked: 'Where's the riot'?"

"Then the police lined up to let a truck out and one of the young guys was crash-tackled, with another guy on top of him. I went over to say, 'get off him' and another 10 cops landed on top. They ripped my hand off the fence and started throwing me. My partner tried to get to me, but the police wouldn't let him. Then I looked across the road and saw my son being arrested.

"My son was charged with intimidating a police officer, even though he was lying on the ground. When they told him to stay still, he stopped moving, but they still charged him. My son only wanted to come to my aid. It is the police who are intimidating everyone, not us.

"And the company has been intimidating people for years. There have been a lot of pay disputes. My partner was underpaid several thousand dollars and now he is going through a compensation claim because three of his fingers were amputated by an unlicensed forklift driver, and now we hear he may not get his compensation payments.

"It is turning into a police-state, a total police-state. What the police did was completely unnecessary, they were just aggravating people, and then they started heavy-handed people. They think they can just push us around and not allow us our freedom of speech. Just like at APEC, a few of these police officers did not have their name badges on either. The police outnumbered the people who were here, and they were only asking for their money. You are not allowed to protect your rights."

Moore expressed disgust for both the state Labor government and the Howard government. "Whatever government is in now—I don't care who it is—if you speak up, you cop it."



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