

Australia: Labor government, unions and ‘lefts’ block fight to defend Pacific Brands jobs

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Three weeks after clothing manufacturer Pacific Brands announced the sacking of 2,700 workers and the closure of several factories, the trade unions and the federal Labor government—with assorted "radical" left groups in tow—have mounted a coordinated campaign aimed at blocking the emergence of any struggle in defence of jobs.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his colleagues are acutely nervous about the continuing public anger over the Pacific Brands sackings. The government is determined to prevent the development of an independent industrial and political campaign by the laid off workers that would set a precedent for other closures and sackings and provide a rallying point for the entire working class to fight the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

That is why the prime minister has been emphasising the issue of redundancy payments, despite the fact that there has been no suggestion that they are at risk. Last week, Rudd told the laid off employees that his employment minister and deputy prime minister Julia Gillard would write to each of them personally "about the state of your entitlements to make sure that they are guaranteed". He continued: "If there is a problem with the company, we'll take it out of the company's hide."

Raising fears about redundancy is aimed at focussing the Pacific Brands workers' concerns about this, not the defence of their jobs. Once the legally owed monies are handed over to the retrenched workers, the government will no doubt hail it a "victory". Meanwhile, the affected workers will face the prospect of never working again.

The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU) is functioning as Rudd's accomplice. From the outset, TCFU national secretary Michele O'Neil accepted that some jobs

would have to go, appealing for discussions with the government and Pacific Brands management to prevent a "complete closure" of the Australian plants. Union officials have since concentrated on appeals to the Labor government to fund retraining programs and waive the usual onerous restrictions on accessing unemployment benefits.

Like Rudd, the TCFU wants an "orderly closure" of the plants slated to be shut down, thereby preserving its privileged status as industrial policeman in the textile sector. As a cover, the bureaucracy is resorting to an increasingly chauvinistic anti-China campaign. Ignoring the fact that the largest Pacific Brands factory to be shut down is in China—affecting 850 employees—the textile union has seized on the company's decision to outsource the work to even lower paid Chinese contract workers.

"What I'm seeing is that China has become the capital of Australia," TCFU official Hanisha McNabb told a rally in Wollongong on Sunday.

The TCFU has now launched a campaign to have the Rudd government legislate a "Buy Australian" policy for all procurement. Aside from being entirely utopian in the era of globalised production, this nationalist appeal is aimed, not at defending jobs, but at bolstering the textile manufacturers' profits by driving down workers' wages and conditions, offering never-ending "productivity" improvements, and promoting tariffs and corporate subsidy measures.

The defence of jobs at Pacific Brands can only take place on the basis of a fight to defend the jobs and conditions of all Pacific Brands workers, wherever they may live. This entails a struggle against the TCFU, which seeks to divide the company's workforce along national lines, and thereby weaken it. The only viable strategy is one that fights to unite all employees, in Australia, New Zealand, China and

elsewhere against the corporate heads and banks driving the plant closures.

The starting point of such a struggle is the occupation of the factories threatened with closure. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in its statement "Reject backroom deals! Launch an independent struggle to defend Pacific Brands jobs!": "To defeat the manoeuvres of the government and the TCFU, Pacific Brands workers must begin to take matters into their own hands. Mass meetings should be called, and the factories occupied, in order to make them organising centres for the development of a wider struggle. Delegations should be sent to other factories, building sites and mines to initiate a concerted industrial and political struggle throughout the working class to defend jobs, wages and working conditions."

Taking this forward requires a political struggle against the Rudd government. This is precisely what the various middle class "left" groupings that have intervened in the dispute oppose. Chief among them is the Socialist Alliance (SA), which has issued a petition calling on the Rudd government to nationalise Pacific Brands and save the 1850 "Australian" jobs.

The latest issue of the SA's newspaper, *Green Left Weekly*, declared: "The government could move to nationalise Pacific Brands if it had the political will. This is the only way the jobs could be saved. If the government won't act to save jobs, then the union movement must build a campaign strong enough to give the government no choice but to act."

This is not a perspective for defending jobs. It is a perspective for convincing workers that nothing can be done, thereby assisting the trade union bureaucracy to create as much demoralisation as possible, so that an orderly closure can proceed. Significantly the SA omits any reference to defending the jobs of Pacific Brands workers in China and New Zealand, sending a message to the trade unions that it completely agrees with their economic nationalism. In failing to mention the possibility of a struggle outside the auspices of the unions—such as occupations or rank and file committees—the SA sends a further message to the unions that it shares their hostility to any independent initiative by the Pacific Brands workers. Above all, the SA's appeals to Rudd are aimed at covering up the fact that, far from lacking sufficient "will" or being susceptible to pressure, his is a government of the very banks and financial institutions that are dictating the Pacific Brands closure—and closures and sackings throughout the country.

The task confronting Pacific Brands workers is to break out of the political straitjacket of Labor and the unions. That can only take place on the basis of an entirely new political perspective—an internationalist and socialist strategy that aims at placing the resources of society in the hands of the social force that created them: the working class, which constitutes the vast majority of the population.

Directly contained within the Pacific Brands struggle is the necessity for the complete reorganisation of social and economic life. Are the lives and livelihoods of workers and their families in Australia and internationally to remain subject to the imperatives of the capitalist profit system, with its drive to depression and war? Or should society's wealth, productive capacity, and technological developments be rationally utilised in order to ensure secure jobs, with decent wages and conditions, for all working people?

The latter alternative requires nothing less than the formation of a workers' government that will take the banks, as well as the major corporations, out of the hands of the financial elite, and transform them into public utilities, democratically owned and controlled by the working class. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge Pacific Brands and all workers to develop a discussion on these issues, contact the *World Socialist Web Site*, study the program of the SEP and apply to join and build it as the new revolutionary party of the working class.



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