

Australia: Unions called in to sell-out Pluto construction workers

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3 February 2010

Confronted by an alliance of employers, the Rudd government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and threatened with massive penalties or jail, striking construction workers on Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in north-western Australia's Pilbara region voted to return to work last Saturday.

However, the 2,000 strikers only agreed to end their week-long stance in defiance of the government and its anti-strike laws after being led to believe that they had forced the employers into negotiations with the trade unions that would genuinely address their grievances. In reality, the unions are working in league with the Labor government and its industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia (FWA), to ensure the dispute ends in a decisive defeat.

The strike erupted on January 22 when the primary construction contractor Foster Wheeler Worley served eviction letters, demanding that workers accept a new accommodation system known as "motelling" or vacate the Gap Ridge housing village in Karratha.

It was the second time within two months that the workers had walked off the job over the plan to end the current practice of assigning the fly-in, fly-out workforce their own individual units or "dongas" for the duration of their employment contracts. Under the "motelling" scheme, they would be forced to move into different units at the beginning of each five-week roster period.

The strikers took a decisive stand against the FWA's return to work orders, which were followed by Federal Court injunctions, threats of severe fines, and legal action by Woodside and its contractor companies for multi-million dollar damages. They also rejected continuous urging by the unions covering them—the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU)—to return to work.

On the eve of Saturday's mass meeting, the ACTU joined Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard's earlier denunciation of the strike as illegal. Assistant secretary Tim Lyons declared: "The strike was not organised by the unions and unions have told the workers at Pluto that they must comply with the orders of the Federal Court. This means returning to work."

Despite this line-up, the workers voted to end the strike only after being told that the unions had secured talks with the employers. One worker told the WSWs that the unions did not have officials at the mass meeting, but speakers told the gathering that they had information from "reliable sources" that FWA had organised a meeting for Monday between Woodside, Foster Wheeler Worley and the three unions.

The "reliable sources" are not difficult to identify. While the unions have publicly distanced themselves from the "illegal" industrial action, they have worked behind the scenes to end the strike, which would have involved approaches to FWA.

The aim of the workers, who are employed under a non-union green-field site agreement struck in 2005, is not just to defend their current accommodation entitlements, but to press for improvements in pay and conditions for working in the Pilbara's remote and harsh conditions.

No doubt many workers believe that their aims and aspirations can be accomplished through the unions. One worker told ABC News at the end of Saturday's meeting: "We're very happy about this, that's basically all we needed, was to talk to Woodside and Foster Wheeler about this issue. They haven't wanted to speak to our representatives."

The agenda of the unions, however, is diametrically

opposed to that of the workers. From the beginning they have cynically used the dispute as leverage to push Woodside to call them in as official bargaining agencies and to broker a deal along the lines demanded by the company.

Even as the strikers were being told of negotiations, a Woodside spokesman informed the media that the company would not be involved in the talks. While it had no objection to discussing “how motelling would be introduced,” its decision to proceed was “non-negotiable”.

Woodside is determined to impose “motelling” to cut costs and allow more workers to be brought on to the site, speed up construction and meet its deadline to produce liquefied natural gas by early next year.

Workers returned from the shift on Saturday to find Federal Court injunctions left on their doorsteps stating that they faced fines of up to \$22,000 and even imprisonment if they resumed industrial action before February 5. The time frame for enforcing the legal threats is designed to allow negotiations with the unions to proceed and for a sell-out deal to be finalised.

This is why, having engineered a return to work, the unions wasted no time rushing into a meeting on Monday convened by FWA deputy president Brendan McCarthy, even though the workers still faced legal threats of damages and heavy fines.

The real agenda being pursued by the unions was shown in a statement by CEPU official Les McLaughlin after the first round of negotiations on Monday. Speaking on behalf of all three unions, McLaughlin confirmed that their aim was to seek union-negotiated enterprise agreements on the Pluto project. “All we are saying is that if they (Woodside) want to maintain their position with motelling, then they should do a new agreement with the unions,” he stated.

In other words, the unions have no real objection to the imposition of “motelling”, provided it is implemented through them. At the same time, McLaughlin referred to the workers being “well paid” and gave an assurance that the unions would seek a “range of non-financial conditions” in work agreements to “aid morale and help with staff retention”. This indicates that the unions have no intention of pushing for the other demands raised by the workers, including increases in allowances.

A sell-out of the Pluto dispute will have implications that go far beyond the immediate project. It will be a precedent

for attacks on working conditions across a dozen or more similar projects proposed in Western Australia worth an estimated \$100 billion. A defeat will also encourage other employers, outside the resources sector, to utilise the punitive measures available to them under Labor’s laws.

The giant mineral and resources companies and major investors are adamant there must be no return to the militancy that was once the hallmark of the mining industry. For its part, the Rudd government is backing the employers to drive through a major restructuring of workers’ conditions to cut costs and bolster corporate returns.

The most important fact for workers to consider is that despite the legal weapons at their disposal and the unreserved backing of the Labor government, Woodside and its contractors are reliant on the unions to achieve their ends.

It is time for workers at Pluto and elsewhere to begin to draw the lessons of the numerous past betrayals carried by the trade unions, and in particular their extensive strike-breaking operations in the 1980s and early 1990s in partnership with Hawke-Keating Labor governments, to dismantle centres of worker militancy such as in the Pilbara.

Having initially taken a decisive stand, Pluto workers must take the dispute out of the hands of the unions and elect a rank and file committee of trusted workers. This will require a turn out to other sections of workers to organise support and begin a broad industrial and political campaign in opposition to the Rudd government’s pro-business program.

At the same time, workers everywhere must come to the aid of the Pluto workers to break the isolation being enforced by the unions. Rank and file committees should be formed in every workplace to begin a counter offensive in defence of wages, working conditions and jobs. Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective, guided by the fight for a workers’ government that would reorganise economic life completely on the basis of human need, not corporate profit, including placing the mining conglomerates under social ownership and control.



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