

# Australia: Construction unions move to sell out Pluto workers

Terry Cook  
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Construction unions are moving, in conjunction with the Rudd government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal, to impose a sell out agreement on around 2,000 workers who have been fighting to defend their conditions at Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in north-western Australia's Pilbara region.

Last month, the workers defied the trade unions, as well as the government, its industrial laws and FWA and court return-to-work orders, to hold an eight-day strike over a range of issues, particularly their evictions from company-supplied accommodation huts. On January 30 they ended the strike after the unions led them to believe they had forced the employers to negotiate their grievances.

Since then, the unions have been in backroom meetings with Woodside, the primary construction contractor Foster Wheeler Worley and FWA deputy president Brendan McCarthy to put together an agreement that meets the company's demands.

The unions have continued the talks despite the fact that 13 contractors on the project are continuing to sue the strikers in the Federal Court, threatening them with individual fines of \$22,000, millions of dollars in damages and jail terms.

On Thursday, Justice Neil McKerracher granted the employers a further injunction that bans industrial action until the case begins in April, even though the workers were not represented in court. The injunction means that if workers resume their strike they will be in contempt of court and could be imprisoned.

At the behest of the Rudd government, the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC)—the notorious policing agency originally established by the

Howard government—successfully applied to join the legal action, opening the possibility of further charges against the strikers.

Union statements to the media indicate that a deal has been struck to allow so-called motelling to be introduced at the Gap Ridge housing village in Karratha—the plan previously decisively rejected by workers.

“Motelling” will end the established practice of assigning the fly-in, fly-out workers individual huts or “dongas” for the duration of their employment contracts. They will be forced to move into different units at the beginning of each five-week roster period, allowing the company to slash the cost of providing accommodation. For the workforce, it will mean they cannot even keep personal possessions in their sleeping quarters and try to make living conditions more bearable in the remote region.

In an interview with *WA Business News* on February 15, Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) secretary Les McLaughlin assured the employers and international investors. “I don't think the workforce will go on strike over this issue,” he said.

McLaughlin, who is also acting as the spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, attempted to camouflage the betrayal. He said Woodside had given a “solid commitment” that existing workers employed on the project could relocate to another accommodation site, known as the Searipple camp.

“Some of the assurances that people needed have been put into place. They (workers) feel at least they've had their concerns aired through Fair Work Australia,”

McLaughlin declared.

The Pluto workers did not undertake two strikes, one in December and another in January, just to have their concerns “aired” but to defend their conditions. The union deal will not only compel the current workers to either accept motelling or move to Searipple, but means that all new employees will be forced into motelling at the Gap Ridge Village.

Introducing the accommodation scheme at Gap Ridge will be the thin edge of the wedge to eventually impose it across the entire project. Woodside will be able to cut costs, allowing it to bring more workers on to the site, speed up construction and meet its deadline to produce liquefied natural gas by early next year.

If the unions succeed in pushing the deal through, they will be rewarded by being accepted by Woodside as labour bargaining agencies in order to deliver further concessions. Currently, the workers are employed under a non-union agreement.

More broadly, imposing a sell-out at Pluto will help prove the unions’ worth to other major mining and energy companies, demonstrating that they are capable of reining in disputes and imposing employer requirements on the myriad of construction projects being commenced across the region.

Workers will undoubtedly be told by the unions that the outcome is the best possible under conditions where they face legal action by FWA, court injunctions and employer damages claims. However, the major impediment to waging a struggle against the combined forces of the Rudd government, the employers and courts is the unions themselves. They are committed to defending corporate profitability and have therefore worked from day one to isolate the Pluto workers.

The Pluto dispute demonstrates that not even the most basic working conditions can be defended outside of a political struggle by the working class directly against the government and its trade union police force.

From the outset, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard has sent unequivocal messages to business that Labor will take whatever measures are needed to suppress workers’ resistance to the restructuring of their conditions. She

repeatedly condemned the Pluto workers’ strikes as illegal under Labor’s laws, giving FWA the green light to move against them and encouraging the employers to seek injunctions and damages. She also called in the hated ABCC to investigate the strikers.

At every step Gillard has been backed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which earlier this month issued a statement also denouncing the Pluto strike as “illegal”.

Pluto workers should reject the union-brokered deal, make a decisive break with the unions and elect a rank-and-file committee of trusted workers to conduct every aspect of their struggle. This will require a turn to other sections of workers to organise support. At the same time, it is incumbent on workers everywhere to defy the straightjacket imposed by the Rudd government’s laws and back the Pluto workers.

Rank-and-file committees should be formed in every workplace to conduct a counter-offensive in defence of wages, working conditions and jobs. Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective that fights for a workers’ government to reorganise economic and social life completely on the basis of human need, not corporate profit. That would mean placing the mining conglomerates like Woodside under social ownership and democratic control.

*The author also recommends:*

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[3 February 2010]

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