

Australia: Unions push through sell-out deal at Pluto

Terry Cook
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Construction unions, working hand in glove with the Rudd government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal and the employers, have shut down industrial action by workers at Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in north-western Australia's Pilbara region.

The agreement, hatched in backroom discussions presided over by FWA deputy president Brendan McCarthy, delivers Woodside's central demand for the introduction of a cost-cutting accommodation scheme known as "motelling" at the company's Gap Ridge Village in Karratha.

The scheme will end the current practice of providing the fly-in, fly-out workers with individual huts or "dongas" for the duration of their employment contracts. Those workers who remain in the Gap Ridge Village, plus new recruits, will be assigned different units at the beginning of each five-week roster period.

Woodside's previous attempts to impose motelling provoked two strikes within two months—a 48-hour strike last December and an eight-day strike in January. The second strike only ended when the unions led workers to believe that the construction contracting employers had agreed to negotiate their grievances.

Earlier, the strikers had defied calls by the unions to obey FWA return-to-work orders threatening massive individual fines, a Federal Court injunction and legal proceedings for multi-million dollar damages, as well as declarations by Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard that they would face the "full force of the law".

The sell-out deal was put to workers at a dawn mass

meeting held near the site on February 24. While reports on what exactly transpired at the meeting are sketchy, statements by Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) state secretary Les McLaughlin make clear the essential outcome.

McLaughlin, who was also acting as the spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, told the *Western Australian* newspaper on February 24 that Foster Wheeler Worley, the project manager and main contractor, had given a commitment "to allow workers hired before December 3 last year to maintain permanent dongas at a separate camp"—that is, at the Sea Ripple camp some 30 kilometres away.

Earlier, McLaughlin told media that many workers believed that once motelling was introduced at Gap Ridge the company would "decide to bring it into Sea Ripple". Admitting this was a "valid concern" McLaughlin declared, "there has been a commitment that that won't happen." Even if this commitment is kept, the arrangement ensures the phasing-out of permanent dongas as new recruits replace workers hired before December 3.

Having secured its central demand, the company agreed to a few minor concessions. The outcome was presented to the mass meeting as a trial, with FWA deputy president McCarthy agreeing to assess the situation in around six weeks time to determine how well the motelling arrangement was operating. Workers were also told that the company had given other commitments, such as giving five female workers units in their preferred block at Gap Ridge, and that McCarthy had recommended one hour's pay for

workers to pack up their belongings at the end of each five-week stint.

The outcome is a betrayal of a key section of workers prepared to fight in defence of basic conditions and in defiance of the legal and political straightjacket imposed by the Rudd Labor government and the unions.

Employers and the Rudd government are acutely sensitive to any eruption of strikes in the key resources sector, upon which Australian capitalism depends heavily. Mining and drilling companies intend to spend \$50 billion next financial year to upgrade their operations to take advantage of rising commodity prices and the current boom in demand from China.

In reaction to the Pluto strike, Woodside chief executive Don Voelte pressed for tougher measures against so-called illegal strikes, including the imposition of immediate penalties. He told the *Australian* last week that the company accepted the involvement of the unions, then added: “When you have an agreement, we expect the unions to follow the law too. It took us eight days to get people back to work in an illegal strike. The area we’d like to focus on is, ‘Hey, once it’s declared illegal, get back to work’.”

Voelte revealed that he had been involved in seven three-hour meetings with Gillard to discuss changes to the Fair Work industrial laws to allow immediate sanctions. Speaking at the National Press Club on February 24, Gillard pledged to continue to take a tough line against unlawful industrial strikes, saying: “People should expect to be punished; they should expect to feel the full force of the law; no apologies, no excuses, full stop.” Under the Labor government’s industrial laws, virtually all forms of industrial action are illegal.

Even as the Pluto workers were due to meet last week, the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), the policing agency called in last month by the Rudd government to investigate the strikes at Pluto, informed the Federal Court it reserved the right to prosecute around 1,660 workers for “illegal” strikes, threatening them with hefty fines,

even if the dispute were settled.

Having courageously defied the punitive operation mounted by the Rudd government, FWA, the courts and the employers, how did the Pluto workers end up accepting an agreement enshrining the conditions they had rejected? There was no lack of militancy, determination and courage. What was lacking was an alternative political perspective to oppose that of the unions, which subordinate the working class to the requirements of the profit system, enforced by the Labor government.

While posing as an ally of the workers, the unions worked overtime to contain the dispute. Far from mounting any campaign to overturn the Rudd government’s industrial relations laws, the unions used the threats of heavy penalties to pressure the Pluto workers into accepting the sell-out deal. The primary objective of the unions was not to defend workers but to prove their value to the employers in stifling the unrest and ending the strikes.

Workers cannot defend their basic rights through the trade unions, which function as industrial police for the government and corporations, but only by mobilising independently on the basis of a socialist program to fundamentally restructure society to meet the needs of the majority, not produce ever-greater profits for the wealthy. Together with the banks, the mining and resources giants that realise enormous profits from the global exploitation of workers must be placed under social ownership and democratic control.



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