

Australia: Visy strikers denounce mass picket line arrests

Our reporters

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Striking Visy Board workers have spoken out against yesterday's vicious police assault, in which pickets were dragged away from the gates of the Dandenong plant in Melbourne, and nearly 30 were arrested. In a major strike-busting operation, scores of police armed with batons and pepper spray arrived to arrest workers for "besetting a premises" and obstruction—charges that carry up to three months' imprisonment. One worker narrowly escaped death after he was hit by a semi-trailer truck.

The police attack underscores the violent methods being brought forward nationally to deal with workers' resistance to the offensive now underway by major companies to slash jobs and conditions. About 500 Visy Board workers in Melbourne and Sydney walked out on December 3 in a dispute over an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Visy wants to cut casual pay rates, increase the number of casual and contract workers, change the dispute resolution procedures, and reduce machine manning levels without consultation.

After the police assault, the immediate response of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which covers the striking workers, was to appeal to the company to resume EBA negotiations. The unions are desperately trying to strike a bargain with the company and head off any broader movement behind the Visy workers. The AMWU has refused to mobilise its members in the packaging, manufacturing and printing industries nationally or workers internationally to support the Visy workers.

"We are calling on Visy to stop this thuggery to come and sit down at the table," ACTU president Ged Kearney told the media. She even claimed that Visy's picket-busting operation was "out of character". Visy's provocative strike-breaking measures, however, are

well known. For years, the company has used police and helicopters to transport strike-breakers, victimise union delegates and lock out workers.

One worker who was arrested yesterday told the WSWs that the assault had been long prepared by Visy management and senior Victorian police.

"A bus load of security officers and management arrived at about 9 yesterday with four trucks behind. They had court orders and management began pointing people out. They had about half a dozen security people filming. They tried to serve a Supreme Court summons stating we were breaking the law but no one would take them and so they dropped the documents on the ground and read out their contents.

"Everyone was chanting so that they couldn't hear what management was saying but more and more police started arriving. There would have been at least 50 cops and four vans, including two big ones used to transport prisoners. Every cop was equipped with pepper spray, batons and other gear. They had backup forces waiting in other places.

"I had friends drive down who tried to join the picket line but police told them that that if they got out of their cars they'd be arrested. They were waiting for anyone that happened to turn onto Greens Road, which they blocked off.

"It moved into the next phase and we all locked arms and sat down on the road but it was just a matter of time. Police grabbed you—about 10 for each person—and broke you from the picket line and behind them were two officers standing there with their hands on the spray.

"While they were doing this at the front of the plant they had trucks, which had been waiting in side streets, move on the side and back entrances. The trucks started moving. Our guys tried to stop one truck at the bottom

gate. It was a semi-trailer and he hit one of guys and ran over his leg. It didn't break but he's lucky to be alive.

"This attack has been well orchestrated and they've had people strategising over this in conjunction with senior police for a long time. This attack shows the attitude of all government, all across Australia and whichever party is in power.

"We didn't have the numbers yesterday and in my opinion the union didn't mobilise enough people for us—outside of the 120 or so guys from our work there was only about another 10 or 12 people on the picket line yesterday. If the union is serious about fighting this then it's got to mobilise some real numbers. Otherwise, we're just wasting our time and money.

"At Dandenong police station they were all ready and waiting—everything was already pre-printed. We were processed real fast and they had about 10 to 15 people in the station just to process us. It was highly-orchestrated and the Dandenong sergeant said, 'If you mess us about, you'll be here until Friday.'

"We've all been charged with besetting a premises and obstructing a footpath or driveway and we've been told we can't be seen in the vicinity of Visy Board in South Dandenong until we've been to court on February 28. The union lawyers had that changed so that we could return to the site if we had written permission from the company in terms of employment. "I'm pretty sure Visy don't want to negotiate on anything or else they wouldn't have taken this sort of action against us.

"If you don't have the right to strike and picket, it seems that you don't have any rights anymore and I'll tell that when the big unions go for their next EBAs their members will be in for a shock."

Another long-standing Visy employee said: "It's quite disgusting for the company to go this far but they've had this pre-planned from the start. They want to break us and take our rights. It's cost cutting and they want total control of the workforce.

"There are three [Victorian] sites—Wodonga, Coolaroo and Dandenong—and if they can break Dandenong they will have the rest. At Wodonga you have to work 12 hours a day or they say don't come back. Here you can still finish after your normal shift if you have to pick up kids."

The Visy worker commented on the fact that the

police attack had occurred under the Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Australia laws, which have maintained and bolstered all the anti-strike provisions of the Howard Liberal government's WorkChoices legislation. "After Howard and WorkChoices I thought it would get better, or at least that was what I was lead to believe, but there's not much of a choice between Labor and Liberal."

Agim joined the Visy picket last night. He works at Fletchers Insulation and has family and friends at Visy. "What happened here today was disgraceful and shocking," he said. "These workers didn't commit any crime but are good people who want to look after their family. But now Visy pickets aren't even allowed to fly union flags—Fair Work Australia has banned them.

"When Labor said they'd get rid of WorkChoices, every Australian worker was hopeful, but Fair Work Australia sounds worse to me. Visy workers are in the middle of protected action. So why is this happening?"

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