Australia: More than 70 striking Visy workers charged, but unions prepare sell-out

Our reporters
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In the most serious police attack on Australian workers for two decades, 71 Visy workers have now been charged with "besetting a premises" and obstruction for picketing during a strike over an enterprise bargaining agreement. The response of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), however, has been to call for "calm", to maintain its isolation of the strikers, to continue negotiations with the giant paper and packaging corporation and to prepare a betrayal.

On December 13, police arrested and charged 30 workers on a picket line at Visy's Dandenong plant in Victoria in a military style strike-breaking operation organised in conjunction with AGC security. Over the next two days, police visited the homes of 40 workers and other union members to lay the same charges. Those charged have been banned from all Visy plants, unless given written permission by the company. If found guilty as charged, they could face three-month jail terms and dismissal by the company.

The AMWU has today called mass meetings of Visy strikers to recommend that they end their strike. While the outcome of these meetings is as yet unknown, the AMWU has brushed aside workers' demands that charges be dropped against all Dandenong pickets—including those from other unions and factories in the area. Union negotiators have accepted a worthless promise from the company that it would "ask the police" to drop the charges against Visy employees.

The two-week walkout involves more than 500 workers nationally. Workers have rejected company attempts to cut casual pay rates, increase the number of casual and contract workers, change dispute resolution procedures, and reduce machine manning levels without consultation. They are also fighting for a 15 percent pay increase over three years.

Since the arrests, workers have stopped blocking trucks at the Dandenong site, but Visy continues to use helicopters to ferry strike-breakers, management and equipment into the plant. In New South Wales, security guards are videoing and photographing pickets outside Visy plants.

There has not been such a large-scale arrest of striking workers since the Hawke-Keating Labor government's deregistration of the Builders Labourers Federation in the early 1980s. The Visy arrests are part of an escalating assault on workers nationally and internationally, as governments and employers implement the austerity measures demanded by the banks and financial markets.

The past fortnight alone has seen serious attacks on strikers in Spain and Bangladesh. Spanish air traffic controllers were forced back to work under military command and face sedition charges and lengthy jail terms for striking earlier this month. On Sunday four striking Bangladeshi garment workers were shot and killed, and over 150 injured, when police opened fire on their demonstrations.

In Australia, employer groups are demanding that the Gillard Labor government crack down on all forms of industrial action. The government's attack on the right to strike, through its "Fair Work Australia" laws, is being aided and abetted by the trade unions, whose officials are acutely nervous that a broader movement against the arrests would win deep support.

The AMWU has not issued a press release or posted information on its web site, let alone called a single mass meeting to inform its members in other paper, packaging, printing and manufacturing plants about the mass arrests. Some of those workers who decided to

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join the Dandenong picket lines last week in support of the Visy workers, and were charged by police, have been virtually abandoned by their unions, which are silent on the issue.

On Tuesday, ACTU president Ged Kearney appealed to Visy to "stop this thuggery and come and sit down at the table." She claimed that the assault was the responsibility of the recently-elected Victorian state Liberal government of Premier Ted Baillieu. These comments were echoed by AMWU national secretary Dave Oliver.

These claims are an attempt to hide the reality—that the attack on the Visy workers has occurred under the Gillard government and is the direct product of its industrial laws, which the ACTU and every union endorsed. Under these laws, all strike action is confined to enterprise bargaining periods and only within tightly policed restrictions that ban secondary support action and effective picketing.

Visy workers are being confronted with the impossibility of defending jobs and basic rights through the unions, which function as direct agencies for the employers and big business. In every dispute the unions seek to ensure that workers are isolated, demoralised and sent back to work on the terms dictated by the government and employers.

Workers need to make a conscious break from the unions and turn to the development of an independent political movement of the working class—one that unifies its struggles with its class brothers and sisters, nationally and internationally, on the basis of the fight for a socialist perspective.

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Striking Visy workers spoke with the WSWS at one of the gates to the Visy plant at Smithfield in Sydney yesterday. They bitterly complained about the manner in which the union had isolated them and kept them in the dark. "We've hardly seen the union," one veteran worker said. "This is the worst EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] dispute I have ever experienced. According to the union, we can't do anything. We are only allowed to delay trucks for one minute."

The union had instructed them not to actually stop trucks entering and leaving the complex. In effect, it had used the Gillard government's industrial laws to make it impossible to conduct a genuine picket line. Another picket said: "I asked the union delegate what would happen if we stopped the trucks. All he said was, 'you'll get arrested.' We shouldn't be in this position!"

A fellow striker summed up the impact of the Labor government's laws and their enforcement by the union. "We've got no power!" he declared. "They are treating us like criminals!" A number of pickets commented that the unions had claimed that "your rights at work" would be protected by ousting the Howard Liberal government in 2007 and electing a Labor government. Now, the opposite was occurring.

A worker who had experienced several previous strikes at other workplaces said: "There has been no support from the union. The communication has been bad. All they said from the start was, 'You can't do this and you can't do that'. To be blunt, the union has done stuff all. This is the worst picket line I have ever been on."

Asked about the arrests and Dandenong and the response of the unions, the worker emphasised: "We have told the union that we won't go back to work unless all the charges are lifted against those arrested in Melbourne. So far, we have had no feedback on that."

Adam, who has worked at the Visy mill in Smithfield for two years, told the WSWS: "The union should be saying that all these charges are dropped, and not just for Visy workers but everyone on the picket line in Dandenong. If the company refuses to agree to that then everyone in the AMWU should be out. This is the only way to do it. If they get away with this it will happen again and again, and every worker will be stuffed, not just at Visy."

Another experienced worker laughed when told that ACTU president Kearney had suggested that Visy's violent strike-breaking operation was unusual for the company, and that former Visy owner Dick Pratt would be "turning over in his grave". The older worker commented: "Pratt and Visy have always used these kinds of methods."

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