Australia: After police attack, unions betray two-week Visy strike

Our correspondents
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A two-week strike by about 500 Visy paper and packaging workers in Sydney and Melbourne ended on Friday after mass meetings endorsed an "in principle" agreement between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AWMU) and the multi-billion dollar Visy corporation. Western Australian and Queensland employees agreed to lift work bans.

Under the federal Labor government's restrictive industrial laws, the Visy workers were engaged in so-called "protected" strike action for an enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Despite this, a highly-orchestrated police and company attack was waged against pickets on December 9 at the Dandenong plant. More than 70 workers were charged with "besetting" and "obstruction" offences, which carry three-month jail terms.

AMWU officials told the mass meetings that Visy had agreed to drop all the charges against picketing workers, declaring this to be a "victory". The officials' claims are bogus, and an age-old technique used by the unions to shut down militant strike action and impose company demands.

Whenever police arrest and charge striking workers, the union bureaucracy "condemns" the attacks whilst insisting on the need to maintain negotiations with the company. After securing agreement for the charges to dropped, they then declare that the bosses have caved in, proclaim victory, and insist that the workers have no choice but to accept most of the company's initial demands.

This was precisely the agenda of the union during the Visy strike. The final wording on the "in principle" EBA agreement that it pushed through at the mass meetings will not be presented to the workers until sometime in February.

While Visy has said it will withdraw demands for the employment of more casuals at cheaper rates of pay, the company rejected outright workers' claims for a 5 percent wage over the next three years—an increase already awarded to its non-union plants. Union negotiators, however, accepted 4, 4 and 4.5 percent annual increases over the three years, far below the rapid interest rate rises and other cost of living increases in essential goods and services.

The company has also demanded the elimination of four rostered days off, or 26.95 hours, for mill workers at the Smithfield plant in Sydney and will attempt to impose this claw-back through a separate hearing in the Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal. The union has agreed in advance to abide by whatever the FWA rules on this issue.

According to reports, the decision to end the strike was made by a large majority at the meetings, but the key political issue—the assault by police and company security personnel, including the use of helicopters and scab labour, under the auspices of the federal Labor government's FWA laws—has been covered up by the unions.

In fact the company has not dropped the charges. Rather, it has simply told the AMWU that its senior management will contact Victoria Police and "request" that the prosecutions not proceed. This means there is no guarantee that the prosecutions will be terminated. Nor is it clear what will happen to the several non-Visy workers who were charged for participating in the Dandenong picket.

The police operation against Visy workers in Dandenong is the most serious attack on workers' rights in Australia in two decades. It was aimed at preventing their struggle from developing into an open political confrontation with the minority Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The assault on the Visy strikers is part of an increasingly violent assault by governments and

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employers internationally as they attempt to impose the austerity measures being demanded by the banks and financial markets on the backs of the working class. In the past month, striking Spanish air traffic controllers have been threatened with sedition charges and forced back to work under military command. Last week, four striking Bangladeshi garment workers were shot and killed, and more than 250 injured, after police opened fire on their demonstrations.

The conditions for these attacks have been created by the labour and union bureaucracies, which have uniformly worked to isolate and divide workers—from factory to factory, nationally and internationally—with every betrayal opening the way for further, more serious assaults.

As well as telling striking Visy workers in Sydney that they would be arrested if their picket lines stopped trucks, the AMWU maintained a deafening silence about the dispute on its web site, posting only two brief articles—the first when the strike began and the second, after the union had secured a return to work. The last, perfunctory, three-paragraph story failed to even mention the Dandenong arrests or the use of strike-breakers, helicopters and video-tape evidence against the workers who were charged. The site also failed to provide any details about Visy's use of a Supreme Court of Victoria injunction to outlaw the picket line and ban all AMWU officials and delegates from manning it.

The assault on Visy workers constitutes a new benchmark in the combined Gillard Labor government-corporate attack on workers' jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The AMWU and the Australian Council of Trade Unions have sought to deflect attention away from the role of the federal Labor government, by laying full blame at the feet of the company and the newly-elected Victorian Liberal government of Ted Baillieu.

While the Liberal government was certainly responsible for the police mobilisation, it was simply following in the footsteps of its predecessor, the former state Labor government of John Brumby, which sent police in against striking construction workers on Melbourne's West Gate Bridge site. And the entire operation, like the West Gate Bridge attack, was organised under the auspices of Gillard's FWA regime.

As in every previous dispute, the unions have responded by deepening their collaboration with the government and the corporations. While Visy workers have courageously defied the company and police attacks, the two-week strike underlines the urgent necessity for workers to break from the political strait-jacket imposed on them by the unions. This requires the development of new forms of struggle, including the formation of independent rank and file committees that will seek to link up with workers nationally and internationally, and the fight for a new socialist and internationalist perspective, aimed at placing the economy under the democratic control of the working class, not the wealthy elite.

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A Smithfield worker, who wanted to remain anonymous, said that although a majority of Visy's box production workers supported the proposed EBA, several mill plant employees were "dissatisfied".

"The company is still trying to take away some of our rostered days off, which we don't agree with. I've got mixed feelings about the deal and some of the blokes here felt that if we'd stayed out for another week, the people still working in the mill would have broken and we'd have been in stronger position," he said.

"We'll have to wait and see the deal in black and white. Some say we've got a good deal but they've gradually been taking conditions away from us over the past couple years. These weren't in the agreement—they were just side arrangements—and these have been eroded away.

"Visy has really gone down the tubes as far as I'm concerned. There's not much trust between us and the company now, and if they try to renege on anything we'll be back out on the street again."

A Visy worker who was arrested on the Dandenong picket told the WSWS: "We weren't really happy with the outcome but we had to get back to work, to live to fight another day. We thought we would be in a stronger position but under the circumstances it was a really dirty fight.

"We were caught by surprise, and the outcome was the complete opposite of what we thought would happen. It was naïveté on our part but we can now see that there has been a prolonged attack on our conditions and that the company can really bully us. A big company like Visy wants us to sacrifice so that they can make more money. We have been broadened by the involvement of others."

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