

Australia: Electrical union promotes right-wing MP Bob Katter

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In a revealing episode, senior bureaucrats in the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) last month met with right-wing independent parliamentarian Bob Katter. Underscoring the strength of their relationship, ETU state secretary Dean Mighell presented Katter before several dozen construction workers at Melbourne's new children's hospital, where the MP chauvinistically denounced "free trade" for sending Australian jobs to China.

The incident demonstrates the reactionary nationalist politics of the trade unions, including the ETU and others that are routinely promoted by various pseudo-socialist organisations as "left" and "militant".

Mighell's support for Katter also points to the political calculations of the ETU bureaucracy. Last year, the union's Victorian branch disaffiliated from the federal Labor Party. In July, the overwhelming majority of its members voted in favour of disaffiliation, reflecting deep hostility within broad layers of the working class towards the government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. For Mighell and the ETU leadership, however, disaffiliation was nothing but a manoeuvre, designed to contain and divert growing anger among workers toward the Labor government, and to the anti-democratic coup that had toppled former prime minister Kevin Rudd and installed Gillard a month earlier. It also served to provide the bureaucracy with a freer hand in its dealings with various Greens and right-wing independent parliamentarians—on whom Gillard's minority government now depends.

The nominal purpose of Katter's meeting with the ETU Victorian leadership was to discuss the future of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), the anti-democratic construction industry "watchdog". The ABCC has the power to imprison and fine workers and union officials who fail to submit to interrogations or hand over documents relating to "unlawful" industrial disputes. The ETU, like the other unions in the building industry, has been fully complicit in the ABCC's operations, having long complied with its various diktats, including the payment of fines totalling millions of dollars. Now, however, Mighell and his colleagues are supporting the Gillard government's planned transfer of the ABCC's functions to a department within Labor's industrial relations Fair Work Australia framework. This will formally abolish the ABCC while keeping its draconian powers on the books.

Legislation will require the support of the Greens' federal

parliamentarian Adam Bandt and at least two other non-Labor MPs to pass the House of Representatives. Hence the ETU's cultivation of Katter, who has indicated he will support the move. According to Melbourne's *Age*, he said, "There might have been some good reasons for its [the ABCC's] introduction at some stage, but it seems to me that there are now some very excessive elements there."

At the ETU's headquarters in Melbourne, Katter met with Mighell and Bill Oliver, state secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). Afterwards, Mighell declared: "[This] really shows I guess to all workers the value of having an independent voice in Canberra. I think it becomes very, very important for working people to realise that there are different voices of people that can speak on their interests. And I think you'll find Bob Katter has got a great view on representation rights for working people. And given the opportunity, people should lend him an ear. And for unions too, to switch on, that it's not just a game of supporting the Labor Party anymore. Politics has changed. The Labor Party has changed. And we need people like Bob Katter helping us out."

When Mighell talks about having an "independent voice in Canberra", he is attempting to hoodwink workers about what political independence for the working class really means. Genuine independence requires a political struggle against the subordination of the working class to the profit interests of the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus, and in defence of its own, long-term class interests—including an end to war, poverty, militarism and attacks on democratic rights; for decent, well-paid jobs for all, full access to free, high quality healthcare and education—against every faction of the bourgeoisie and its political apologists. For Mighell on the other hand, "independence" means the unions' ability to manoeuvre between bourgeois parliamentarians of different stripes, in order to advance the narrow interests of the privileged bureaucratic stratum of which he is part. His promotion of Katter is aimed at preventing workers from critically examining the lessons of their bitter experiences with Labor over the past 120 years, and breaking decisively from the reactionary racialist and nationalist nostrums on which it has always been grounded. Mighell's posturing as "not just supporting the Labor Party" is belied by the very purpose of his meeting with Katter—to ensure that the government's construction industry legislation passes through parliament. Mighell remains an ardent supporter of both Gillard personally and her pro-capitalist, anti-working class

government.

Moreover, the idea that Katter represents the interests of the working class is patently absurd. The Queensland parliamentarian was a long-time member of the National Party, the rural-based junior coalition partner of the Liberals, before he quit to stand as an independent in 2001. Katter is the latest in a long line of right-wing country MPs who combine populist denunciations of free trade, and demands for farming and small business subsidies, with rabid attacks on the democratic rights of immigrants and minority groups. In one notorious incident in 1996, Katter defended a colleague who had described citizenship ceremonies as “dewogging”, and called critics of his racist position “little slanty-eyed ideologues who persecute ordinary average Australians”.

Speaking before the children’s hospital construction workers on December 9, Katter declared: “I cannot answer why every single member of mainstream parties in Australia believe in free markets and free trade ... If you have free markets everywhere, every single job in Australia will move over to China. That’s what free markets mean, that’s what it has to mean, it can’t mean anything else. And all you’re going to do here is quarrying.”

This is not the first time that the ETU and right-wing parliamentary elements have come together to scapegoat Chinese workers for the manufacturing and unemployment crisis in Australia. In September 2009, the ETU’s Victorian branch released a report it had commissioned, titled “The China Advantage—What Price a Free Trade Agreement with China?”. The document was authored by Rick Brown, a former adviser to Howard government ministers Kevin Andrews and Nick Minchin and current head of CPI Strategic, described by the *Australian* as a “conservative consultancy”. Speaking at the official launch in Canberra were Bob Katter and his fellow rural independents (who now prop up the minority Labor government) Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor. According to the *Australian*, the National Party’s Senate leader Barnaby Joyce had agreed to participate, but was unable to do so due to illness.

In his remarks at the event, Mighell demanded that the government “put Australians before free trade agreements”. He declared, “I don’t think any union in this country would think it is fair or reasonable to ask Australian workers to compete with Chinese workers, to condemn our kids to Chinese wages, to Chinese health and safety laws.”

Such chauvinism is aimed at dividing Australian workers from their counterparts throughout the region, and diverting them from mounting a struggle against the unions’ complicity with the corporate onslaught against workers’ wages and conditions, especially in the manufacturing sector, since the 2008 global financial crisis.

Mighell is acutely conscious of the extent of the crisis; in Victoria alone, 40,000 industrial jobs have been destroyed in the last two years, leaving working class centres such as Broadmeadows with official unemployment rates of more than 15 percent. The jobs crisis is an expression of international processes, in which the ruling elites in country after country are implementing, at the behest of the banks and financial institutions, economic “restructuring” measures aimed at permanently reducing the living conditions of the working class. In Australia, as

internationally, the trade unions have played a key role in facilitating this offensive. They have blocked and suppressed any struggle in defence of jobs, and rammed through real wage cuts, productivity speed ups, and other concessions.

Organically tied to the fortunes of Australian capitalism—and bitterly hostile to the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at uniting the struggles of working people in Australia, China, and internationally—the ETU’s support for Katter and other right-wing forces expresses the reactionary political logic of the nationalist program on which the trade unions have always been based.

The ETU’s support for the rural independents extends to the financial sphere. The *Australian Financial Review* reported last August that the union helped fund Katter and Oakeshott’s federal election campaigns. Mighell acknowledged the donations but failed to outline exactly how much was involved. Last August, in the federal election campaign in Victoria, the ETU donated \$325,000 to the Greens. Then in the state election campaign last November, Mighell handed over \$25,000 to a candidate of the misnamed Socialist Party, one of the most craven of the pseudo-left organisations in its backing for the trade union bureaucracy.

Perhaps more than any other layers within the union apparatus, Mighell and his ETU colleagues, who tout themselves as representatives of the “rank and file”, recognise that the Labor Party has lost its social base in the working class, leaving an enormous and potentially explosive political vacuum. They are concerned above all to fashion some kind of safety valve—whether via the Greens, the ex-left, or the populist far right—capable of diverting the anger of workers and young people into safe channels, within the existing parliamentary set up. In order to defend its most basic rights and conditions, the working class must make a conscious political break with the Labor Party and trade unions, establishing its genuine political independence from them, and develop a revolutionary party, based on a socialist and internationalist program. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.



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