

Australian union leader stokes anti-Chinese chauvinism as he launches protectionist campaign

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25 February 2011

The 125th anniversary national conference of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), held last week on the Queensland Gold Coast, was a forum for unabashed anti-Chinese chauvinism, as the union launched its “Don’t Dump on Australia” protectionist campaign.

Addressing the 500-strong conference, which included well-heeled union bureaucrats, federal, state and local politicians, along with big business representatives, AWU national secretary Paul Howes set the tone, declaring: “Australian jobs, Australian companies are going under because Chinese companies are not playing by the rules in the global free trade game.”

“AWU workers,” Howes alleged “continually take the brunt of deliberate Chinese government policies that are not based on market principles; not based on WTO rules, but rather on a model of state capitalism grounded in strategic goals to win dominant market share, at the expense of international competitors”.

Praising the United States and Canada for their moves to “act against dumped products” Howes continued: “Australia should follow that lead – and not worry about claims that this is a new form of protectionism.” Appealing directly to the Gillard federal Labor government, he declared: “The fate of AWU members rests with the creation and enforcement in Australia of a strong anti-dumping regime.”

The AWU campaign has nothing to do with defending jobs or the rights of AWU workers, or any other section workers, but serves a diametrically opposed end. Like all union moves to protectionism, the AWU’s anti-dumping campaign is aimed at harnessing Australian workers behind Australian-based employers who, no less than their Chinese counterparts, are fighting to grab a “dominant market share”.

Over the past 15 years, the AWU—along with every other union—has worked in lockstep with big business to abolish protective work practices, lower wages and slash working conditions, claiming these measures would make Australian

employers “internationally competitive” and preserve jobs into the future.

This claim has always been a fraud. In the past two years alone, in the wake of the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008, thousands of jobs have been destroyed in the manufacturing sector, as companies have moved to fundamentally restructure their operations. According to one estimate, some 40,000 industrial jobs have been destroyed since the 2008 crash, just in the state of Victoria.

At the same time, the AWU’s protectionist agenda, and its stoking of anti-Chinese chauvinism, acts to divide Australian workers from their class brothers and sisters in China, and to divert them from the real cause of the destruction of jobs and working conditions—the operations of the profit system. It is precisely these operations that are defended and implemented through the pro-market policies of the Gillard Labor government and buttressed by the unions, which act as the industrial policemen for the corporate elite.

Little wonder then that Howes’s chauvinist diatribe received substantial airing in the *Australian* newspaper, Rupert Murdoch’s national flagship publication. While not championing a return to protectionism, the *Australian*, along with other publications in the Murdoch stable, have always been quick to seize on and promote any diversion that could assist in weakening, confusing and dividing the working class—from anti-refugee xenophobia to anti-Muslim racism.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that protectionism and other trade war measures invariably lead to military war, as each national government resorts to ever more aggressive means to secure the commercial and economic interests of its own corporations.

In this context, it is highly significant that Howes praises Washington’s trade war measures against China, and that his anti-China campaign dovetails with recurring calls by sections of the US media for “a broad challenge against China’s illegal trade practices”.

Last year, the White House signed an order imposing

punitive tariffs on Chinese tyre imports and steel pipe products, threatening even tougher measures to force Beijing to revalue the yuan against the dollar. Such moves that benefit US exports—is hardly “playing by the rules in the global free trade game” so revered by Howes.

Washington’s protectionist moves have been accompanied by increasing belligerence against China. It has stepped up US military presence in the region, made a \$6.4 billion arms sale to Taiwan and consolidated its military alliances with South Korea and Japan.

Howes and the union bureaucracy, dominated as they are by their own immediate interests, are impervious to the catastrophic consequences that a military conflict between the US and China would have for working people in Australia, China and internationally.

Significantly, while blaming China for job losses in Australia, Howes was full of praise for Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard. He hailed her and her Labor government for abolishing the former Howard government’s hated industrial relations regime, WorkChoices, “whose principal role,” Howe declared “was to destroy the Australian union movement and to create an underclass of working poor in this nation”.

He failed to mention that Labor’s own Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial laws are, in many respects, even more draconian than WorkChoices. They retain all of the former’s anti-strike provisions, which employers throughout the country are using to suppress key struggles and penalise workers fighting in defence of jobs, wages and working conditions.

Howes also credited the Labor government with having taken measures that supposedly protected the Australian economy from the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis and preserved jobs. He claimed that when he addressed the last AWU conference “my biggest fear and concern was that most of the coming two years would be spent fighting off massive job cuts, caused by the global financial crisis”.

The Australian economy only grew during this period because of demand in China and other Asian countries for its vast reserves of coal and other mineral resources, needed to fuel production there.

Ironically, Howes is demanding that Australian governments, both federal and state, refuse to allow Chinese steel to be used in the construction of government infrastructure projects—ignoring the fact that it is precisely in order to produce “Chinese steel” that the Chinese regime purchases such enormous quantities of Australian coal, which is mined by Australian workers.

In addition, Howes used the conference to unleash a populist tirade against mining and mineral resources giant Rio Tinto, denouncing its CEO Tom Albanese for “sucking

the blood, sweat and tears out of workers” and declaring the AWU would “take on” the company.

The cause of Howes’s wrath is not Rio Tinto’s exploitation of its workforce, but the fact that the company is far more aggressive than other employers in barring the AWU from its operations, thus denying the union a place at the bargaining table.

Had Rio Tinto employed the union’s services, the AWU would have been more than willing to function as its agent, imposing the company’s demands and working to suppress any opposition, just as it has done through collective bargaining at hundreds of other enterprises, including in the auto parts industry, the resources processing sector, the airlines and construction.

Howes has no intention of “taking on” Rio Tinto. He was one of the key operatives who manoeuvred, behind the scenes, on behalf of the major mining companies, to remove former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in a political coup last year, and install Julia Gillard into the top position. One month later, Gillard scotched a proposed resources super profits tax that would have cost mining companies, Rio Tinto included, an extra \$60.5 billion over eight years.

Not surprisingly, Gillard was invited to the AWU conference as one of its keynote speakers. She used the opportunity to lavish praise on Howes, in return for services rendered. While the government has since delivered him a rebuke for his attack on Rio Tinto, Gillard knows full well that his declaration of war is so much hot air.

What both the government and employers do fear, however, is that years of unrelenting attacks on jobs, working conditions and basic rights have produced such seething hostility among workers that even empty rhetoric could be enough to ignite struggles across the resources sector and more broadly, which could rapidly get out of the unions’ control.

This is why employer groups are using Howes’s outburst to push the government for an even tougher industrial relations regime. Declaring his attack to be “worrying” under conditions where Gillard’s Fair Work Act is facing “a testing time”, Australian Industry Group CEO Heather Ridout warned: “The government needs to be flexible and open to change if required.”



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