

Australian waterfront union capitulates, calling off industrial action

Patrick O'Connor
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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) yesterday called off work bans imposed at Patrick Stevedores' terminals in Sydney, Brisbane and Fremantle. The union's abject capitulation in the face of a highly provocative campaign waged by Patrick against its workforce was no doubt closely coordinated with the Labor government. The episode underscores the MUA's determination to entrench itself as the enforcer of restructuring measures and productivity speed-ups on the docks, ahead of a huge anticipated increase in mineral exports in the coming period.

The MUA's work bans, which it described as "limited" restrictions, legally authorised under Labor's Fair Work Australia legislation, began on Wednesday amid ongoing negotiations with Patrick for a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The stevedoring company responded by effectively locking out its employees, bringing all activity on the three affected ports to a halt. Patrick's move was calculated to trigger a confrontation that would see Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard use her draconian Fair Work laws to discipline a key section of the working class and set a precedent for the future.

In response, the MUA complained that no such conflict was necessary, and that if only Patrick would act "responsibly" things could be quickly resolved behind closed doors between company executives and union bureaucrats.

National secretary Paddy Crumlin criticised the stevedoring company for "unilaterally closing down its container terminals, which was never intended by the MUA." He added that the union was concerned over the impact on beef and other agricultural exporters: "We've listened to the concerns of the rural community and responded accordingly," he stated.

Crumlin said that he hoped the return to work would be taken as an "olive branch" and encourage Patrick executives to "get back to the table and talk to us." The union chief added that he was ready to abandon previous EBA demands, which had included a 6 percent annual pay increase and workplace safety improvements, including having a union-appointed safety officer present on every shift. "They [Patrick] are the ones that have said that they've made their last and final offer," Crumlin stressed. "We've never said that."

Concerned that the union could lose control over its members, Crumlin warned of mounting anger. He said it had been "a tough sell" to secure a majority vote of MUA members for the return to work in Sydney, Brisbane, and Fremantle, and added, "They [the workers] have been hurt at the way the company treated them in the media, and are frustrated and angry."

In 1998, Patrick worked with the former Liberal government of John Howard to instigate a violent confrontation on the waterfront, aimed at replacing its workforce with non-union labour. The dispute was settled in the courts, with the MUA maintaining its privileged role in the industry while imposing all the company's demands, including massive job losses, greater casualisation, and productivity speed ups. Now the union is again pleading that it is ready and willing to work with the stevedoring companies on a new round of restructuring measures.

Crumlin was a guest speaker at the annual conference of the Australian Mines and Metals Association in Queensland on Thursday. According to the *Courier Mail*, the MUA chief "challenged employers to pick sides and decide whether they wanted to continue a system of

confrontation or start working for a better outcome.” He declared: “Make up your mind if you are with us or against us because the national economy is a stake.”

The unions are well aware of their role within a key section of the economy’s export infrastructure. At the same time, Patrick and other stevedoring companies want to entrench their 1998 victory, and block any concessions on the number of casual workers and on safety conditions that could impede their handling of higher export volumes in the future. The *Australian* yesterday reported that there was now a record planned investment in the resources sector of \$173 billion, which included “94 projects at an advanced stage of development (committed or under construction) and includes 35 energy projects, 35 mineral mining projects, 20 infrastructure projects and four minerals and energy processing projects.”

Patrick’s provocative response was aimed at triggering a ban on any industrial action on the docks, imposed either through Fair Work Australia or via direct Labor government edict. Key sections of the corporate elite have made clear they regard as intolerable any form of industrial action, however limited, in key infrastructure operations. This why there was an immediate clamour for the Labor government to intervene when the MUA’s bans took effect Wednesday.

The *Australian* outlined the agenda in an editorial published yesterday, entitled “Waterfront productivity gains must be defended.” The Murdoch-owned newspaper declared that the waterfront workers’ ability to legally impose work bans highlighted “one of the major weaknesses in the Gillard government’s IR [industrial relations] system.” It continued that Fair Work Australia faced a “big test” with Patrick’s application for the dispute to be resolved through compulsory arbitration. “As well as arbitrating a reasonable outcome,” the editorial demanded, “Fair Work must take a principled stand, put the national interest first and clamp down on work bans during negotiations on wages and conditions.”

All industrial action outside of EBA negotiating periods is already outlawed by Labor’s anti-democratic Fair Work regime; the *Australian* is effectively demanding a blanket ban on all strikes and other measures in what it deems “essential industries.” This includes the airline industry. The editorial complained of the prospect of Qantas engineers and pilots taking industrial action,

declaring it was a “bleak prospect for productivity that engenders little confidence in the government’s system.” The *Australian* concluded by warning Gillard that unless something were done, the “inescapable conclusion” would be “that Labor’s IR system is badly broken [and] needs to be fixed.”

The Labor government has stressed that its Fair Work regime is up to the task—signalling that it will not permit waterfront workers’ concern for their safety and working conditions to get in the way of the restructuring measures deemed necessary to maintain the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism. Workplace Relations Minister Chris Evans publicly intervened in the Patrick dispute as soon as the work bans were imposed on Wednesday, highlighting the grounds for a potential return to work order.

The MUA’s actions, and its publicly stated support for Patrick’s restructuring and the Labor government’s industrial relations legislation, underscores the impossibility of port workers, or any other section of the working class, defending their jobs, wages, and conditions through the trade unions. Workers are confronted with the urgent need to develop new, independent organisations of struggle, including rank and file committees, which seek to unite waterfront workers with other sections of the working class facing similar attacks, including Qantas employees, workers in the car industry, throughout manufacturing and in the public sector. This requires a fight against the Gillard government and its “free market”, anti-working class agenda, based on a socialist and internationalist program that aims to rationally reorganise economic and social life to meet the social needs of ordinary working people, rather than the profits and wealth of the minority at the top.



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