

The Australian Workers Union, steel sackings and anti-China chauvinism

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The Australian Workers Union (AWU) is stepping up its reactionary nationalist campaign to scapegoat China for the destruction of about 1,400 jobs at BlueScope steel, announced last Monday. Paul Howes, the union's national secretary, has urged the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard to join Washington in instigating what amounts to a trade and currency war with Beijing.

"We aren't doing the international work that we should be doing in assisting our allies in putting the pressure on the Chinese to give their currency a real value," Howes told ABC Radio this morning. "We shouldn't be shy of saying to countries like China that if you want to be a global player, if you want to have access to institutions like the WTO [World Trade Organization], then you have to do what the rest of us did, and that is float your dollar [currency] and open yourself up to the markets."

He added: "I can't accept the G20 can't put the pressure on China that is needed. I think too many governments and too many people are afraid of China."

The union bureaucrat's provocative campaign is a consciously prepared diversion, aimed at disorienting workers and stymieing the development of a political struggle against the BlueScope layoffs. In the name of protecting steel jobs by boosting the competitiveness of the Australian steel industry at the expense of China, Howes is advocating an economic war that can only have devastating consequences for workers in Australia, China and internationally.

In Port Kembla, Wollongong, and Port Hastings, Victoria, entire communities will be devastated. The

layoffs in the steel industry are only the first shot in an onslaught that is being readied against the entire working class as a vast restructuring of Australian capitalism is engineered. In collaboration with the Gillard government and corporate executives, the trade unions are preparing to enforce the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the smashing up of wages and conditions. The AWU's protectionist campaign is aimed at dividing Australian workers from their class brothers and sisters in China and internationally, and to cover up the real cause of the destruction of jobs and working conditions—the operations of the profit system.

What is Paul Howes talking about when he refers to assisting "our allies" against China? US imperialism is no ally of the working class, in Australia or anywhere else.

The AWU bureaucrat is urging the Labor government to more aggressively spur on the Obama administration as it orchestrates ever more provocative confrontations with its leading economic and strategic rival. Obama has imposed tariffs on Chinese steel pipe and tyre imports and has threatened to classify Beijing as a "currency manipulator." This has raised the spectre of an open trade and currency war between the US and China, with the world market breaking up into rival trading and currency blocs as it did in the 1930s.

All of the malignant contradictions that produced the global collapse in that decade, culminating in World War II, are reasserting themselves once again, threatening the eruption of war between the US and China. Paul Howes's reference to "our allies" has definite connotations of militarism and war. The AWU

is seeking to tie the working class to the Australian ruling elite as it staggers alongside Washington towards a military catastrophe.

Howes functions as an open agent of US imperialism within the trade union bureaucracy, embodying that section of the Australian ruling elite that regards its interests as being bound up with an ever closer alliance with Washington directed against rival powers in Asia.

Howes entered politics through the pseudo-radical Democratic Socialist Party (now Socialist Alliance), before being recruited into the New South Wales Labor Right and trade union bureaucracy while still a teenager. He rose rapidly up the ranks, becoming AWU chief in 2007 when he was just 26 years old.

Last year, Howes played a leading role in orchestrating the anti-democratic coup against Kevin Rudd. WikiLeaks's subsequent publication of US diplomatic cables revealed that, like Mark Arbib and several others, Howes was a "protected source" of the US embassy in Canberra. He secretly supplied American diplomatic officials with inside information on the leadership tensions between Rudd and Gillard while the Australian people were kept entirely in the dark.

The AWU's anti-China campaign in the wake of the BlueScope sackings dovetails with the economic and strategic calculations underlying Gillard's installation. She has been tasked with: 1) implementing savage public spending cuts as part of an austerity agenda aimed at permanently lowering the living standards of the working class, and 2) with wholly aligning Australian imperialism with its American ally against China.

In throwing his weight behind this reckless agenda, Howes is drawing from the AWU's foul historical traditions of White Australia racism, which from the very beginning of the Australian nation state were aimed at subordinating the working class to the national bourgeoisie and cutting it from its class brothers and sisters in Asia.

Workers must reject the latest attempt to divide them

from their fellow workers internationally. The perspective being advanced by the unions—for a trade and currency war with China—will, if realised, have devastating consequences for working people. The global economic crisis is already leading to trade war that threatens to plunge wide sections of the population into unemployment and poverty—yet this is the "solution" advanced by the unions for the crisis in the Australian steel and manufacturing sectors!

To advance its own interests, the working class must reject the attempts of the unions to divide it on national or racial lines. The only realistic solution to the escalating global economic crisis and the attack on jobs and wages is the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective, uniting workers of Australia, China and all nationalities in a common struggle for the abolition of the profit system.

The author recommends:

Oppose the BlueScope sackings! Fight for a socialist strategy to defend steel and manufacturing jobs
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