

Australian Labor “left” Doug Cameron, the mining companies and the steel layoffs

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Following BlueScope Steel’s announcement last Monday that it will sack 1,400 workers, trade union bureaucrats and Labor government ministers alike have swung into action, mounting coordinated campaigns aimed at creating maximum confusion among steel workers, and pre-empting a struggle in defence of jobs and in opposition to the profit system.

The Labor Party’s so-called Left faction has begun denouncing the major mining corporations, complementing the Australian Workers Union’s chauvinist attacks on China which buys the minerals. BlueScope employees are being subjected to a conscious political one-two act, with right- and “left”-wing diversions being pulled out to cover over the real issues they confront.

Senator Doug Cameron, the Labor Left faction’s national convenor, this week declared: “I think there is a responsibility on the mining industry—the Gina Rineharts, the Clive Palmers, the Twiggy Forests, the BHPs, the Rio Tintos—to actually stop lining their wallets and start making an investment in manufacturing jobs in this country.”

Who does Cameron think he is kidding? As far as the mining industry and its magnates are concerned, their sole responsibility is to accumulate profits and service the interests of their shareholders. This was graphically demonstrated just one year ago, after the extremely modest proposal advanced by the Rudd Labor government, on the basis of the advice of the Treasury Department, to initiate a Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT), which would take some of their profits and utilise them to mitigate the effects of the rising dollar and interest rates on other sections of industry. The

response of the mining companies was to orchestrate an unprecedented multi-million dollar campaign to remove the government, with Gina Rinehart, Australia’s wealthiest individual sitting on a personal fortune of more than \$10 billion—leading protest rallies against Rudd and the mining tax.

For Cameron to argue, just over 12 months later, that somehow a sharp word from parliament will see Rinehart et al invest their profits in manufacturing jobs is to throw dust in the eyes of workers. Moreover it serves to cover up the nature of the government that the miners themselves helped install—a government completely dedicated to the interests of the corporate elite.

One of Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s first actions, after she replaced Rudd in the June 2010 Labor Party coup, was to junk the RSPT. Cameron, like every other Labor parliamentarian, went along with the entire affair, keeping his mouth shut while a handful of Labor and trade union apparatchiks orchestrated the leadership change behind the backs of the Australian population.

Since then, the Gillard government has functioned as the direct instrument of the mining companies. In a grovelling address to a conference of mining industry executives in June, the prime minister explained that much of her “daily work” was taken up with promoting their interests.

On Wednesday, BHP Billiton reported a net profit of \$22.5 billion, 86 percent higher than the previous financial year and the largest in Australian corporate

history. Its announcement follows similar record profits reported by Rio Tinto and Xstrata earlier in the year.

The mining boom is serving as the transmission belt into Australia of the deepening global economic crisis, triggering a coordinated assault on the living standards of working people everywhere. At the same time as prosecuting the big miners' interests, Gillard's Labor government is orchestrating a sweeping restructuring of Australian capitalism, involving the permanent lowering of wages and living standards to boost profits, and "international competitiveness."

The one million workers employed in the manufacturing sector last year suffered a decline in average real wages. And the BlueScope layoffs will be quickly followed by others throughout the economy, with as many as 100,000 jobs expected to be destroyed in the next six months alone. Big business and finance capital have placed a question mark over the viability of entire sections of industry, including steel, car production, and petrol refining.

There can be no challenge to corporate power on the basis of a parliamentary perspective aimed at pressuring the powers-that-be. The working class has to mobilise independently, building new forms of organisations, including rank-and-file committees in direct opposition to the trade unions, and above all a new revolutionary party based on a socialist and internationalist program.

Workers must take up a political struggle against the Gillard government and its various props, and fight for the socialist reorganisation of society, with the mining sector, banks and other multi-billion dollar corporations placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

Doug Cameron's bankrupt demagoguery is directly aimed at preventing the emergence of such a political struggle. He has criticised the miners, and BlueScope Steel executives—their \$3 million bonuses were "absolutely unbelievable," he declared, adding that their attitude was "immoral, reprehensible and unacceptable"—as a means of diverting the deep anger felt by the 1,400 sacked workers.

Cameron has extensive experience in such job-shedding operations. Before entering parliament after the 2007 election, he served as the national secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and vice president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). During the 1983-1996 Hawke-Keating Labor governments, he played a key role in breaking down resistance within the working class to the pro-business restructuring program of the government and unions that decimated the manufacturing sector. Cameron's specialty was in betraying and helping smash up many of the traditionally most militant sectors of the working class, such as the metalworkers.

The former bureaucrat is once again advancing his services on behalf of the Australian corporate elite, this time from inside parliament, amid a new and even more sweeping round of restructuring measures.

The author recommends:

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

[25 August 2011]

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

[24 August 2011]



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