

Waterfront workers disgusted by Australian government's intervention

Our correspondents
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WSWS reporters this week spoke to waterfront workers in Port Kembla and Melbourne about last week's lockout by the stevedoring company POAGS, which provided the pretext for intervention by the Gillard Labor government. There were bitter reactions to the subsequent calling off of all industrial action by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA).

In Port Kembla, where POAGS used helicopters to fly in strike-breaking management personnel, a young casual Patricks worker said: "I think it's bad for the industry and the country as whole. The P&O [POAGS] guys are fighting for a new EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] and better conditions and the company has brought in scab labour and locked them out."

He said there were parallels with the 1998 waterfront dispute, when Patricks, then run by POAGS stakeholder Chris Corrigan, locked out its workforce and brought in scabs, before ultimately striking a deal with the MUA. "It's kind of the same thing that happened in 1998. Workers are just fighting for better conditions and the company is just bringing us down."

The companies were trying to take conditions back, decrease pay rates and impose more flexible hours. Like POAGS, Patricks was demanding fewer meal breaks.

Still only in his 20s, the young worker described the unpredictable hours he faced. "I'm totally irregular. You get a text message at 3 pm each day to tell you whether you are working the next day. If you are not working, they can call you in any time of the day, even 2 am, to come in to work."

"That's what it's like already! This is seven days a week! Permanents know what they are doing ahead of time, but not the casuals. At Patricks, about 50 percent of the guys are casuals, but at P&O it's about 80-90 percent. This is what has happened since the 1998

dispute."

BlueScope Steel's recent elimination of 1,400 jobs was also hitting Patricks workers at Port Kembla, because BlueScope would no longer be exporting steel through the port. "We are losing a lot of jobs from the BlueScope retrenchments. It would be about 100 to 150 jobs, out of 200 there," the worker explained.

Commenting on the Labor government's intervention, backed by the MUA, to call off all action at POAGS, he said: "That's terrible. If the company won't negotiate and the guys go out, and they bring in scab labour—by helicopter—then they say we go back to work. We should have more rights to take whatever action we want."

"It's pretty much the same thing as happened at Qantas. You go on strike, get locked out the gate and the government advises you to go back to work, as if nothing's happened! This follows the BlueScope sackings as well. It's happening all over the country at the moment."

"It's terrible for the companies like this to be backed by the Labor government. I thought the Labor government was meant to be for the workers. At the moment, it looks like they're not on the side of the workers. With Julia Gillard taking over, it's all gone downhill. I'm a Labor supporter, but not anymore."

"Things just seem to be getting worse. Are we an exception to what's happening in Greece and around the world? It doesn't look like it."

"From all the union meetings I've attended, it does appear that the unions do try hard, but perhaps not hard enough. They keep saying, this is the best we can get, and we have to take it. What choice have we got?"

Asked about the Socialist Equality Party's call for the formation of rank and file committees to organise independently of the union apparatuses, he commented:

“We do have elected committees in each company and they talk to the company and the union and come back to the workers for a vote.”

When it was suggested that these committees operated as an arm of the union, he agreed. “Yes, pretty much, but we tend to deal through the union. That’s what we pay dues for, but it’s a battle.” He thought workers should take control of the docks and the entire economy out of the hands of the wealthy few, like Chris Corrigan, but it would be a “long, hard battle.”

Danny Zeggieri, a former waterside worker for 47 years, said conditions had deteriorated so much that they were almost as bad as in the 1930s, when workers had to compete to be employed each day. “Things had improved over the time I was there, until I retired in 1994. Conditions have gotten worse since then. It’s bad now! I wouldn’t even work there. There are no conditions—what with 12-hour shifts, fewer breaks, overtime being worked at minimum rates.

“Why has all this happened? The union supports the Labor government and can’t do otherwise, but I wouldn’t give this Labor government tuppence. As you see with the promotion of Bill Shorten and Greg Combet in cabinet, the union leaders and the government leaders are the same.”

Many workers are now working for labour-hire companies, including on the waterfront, with even worse pay and conditions. One, who had worked for Patricks for three weeks, said he had averaged only three days’ work per week.

In Melbourne, Bill, an older port worker, denounced Labor’s Fair Work laws. “You can’t go on strike. Striking is illegal; you can be sued. I went to all the protests about Howard’s Work Choices. I thought the protests were good—that was why Howard got voted out. But compared with the days of what we fought for, now we’re living in a shady world. We don’t have any rights.

“We need civil disobedience. Look at the Occupy movement—that was only the tip of the view. Underneath that, all mainstream people are getting fed up with all these bankers and the way they are behaving. Look at the Lehman Brothers collapse. All these phony derivatives, they knew they were worth nothing. It was fraud, but nobody has gone to jail.”

Bill condemned the conduct of the nurses’ union, which enforced the Victorian Liberal government’s use

of Labor’s Fair Work tribunal to also end all industrial action against the erosion of working conditions. “Now the nurses are being told to resign by their union. It would be a big mistake.” He remembered a similar course of action during the 1989 pilots’ dispute under the Hawke-Keating Labor government, in which pilots resigned, never to be reinstated.

The authors also recommend:

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