

# Union prepares to sell out Australian port workers

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A combined operation by the Gillard Labor government, P&O Automotive and General Stevedoring (POAGS) and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is underway to impose substantial cuts in the conditions of port workers.

The stevedoring company last week locked out workers at its ports across three states, providing the pretext for newly appointed Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten to intervene. At his request, the MUA called off industrial action for at least four weeks—a so-called “cooling off period”—in order to enter backroom negotiations overseen by the government’s Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal.

What is being prepared in this “mediation” can be judged by a statement by Western Australian MUA state secretary Chris Cain. He told the media: “It needs to be known that the union will not be moving on our safety claims.” He avoided naming any other issues as non-negotiable, including the productivity trade-offs sought by POAGS, such as the abolition of paid meal breaks, in exchange for 4 percent annual pay increases.

In earlier negotiations, the MUA had already offered “flexibility” and other concessions, such as changes to classifications and rosters, to match the company’s demands for cost-cutting.

As for the safety claims, the unsafe conditions at POAGS ports are a legacy of the decades-long collaboration of the unions with employers to restructure waterfront operations. Two POAGS workers were killed on the job last year. The MUA admits that many workers at POAGS work “protracted 12-hour shifts without adequate rest breaks in between,” causing dangerously high levels of fatigue.

One third of the POAGS workforce in Western Australia is on compensation due to job injuries. Health

and safety figures indicate there is 40 percent higher risk of death for POAGS workers compared to other industries.

Such conditions were made possible by the MUA’s betrayal of the 1998 waterfront dispute, in which Chris Corrigan, now chairman of POAGS, sacked the entire 1,400-strong workforce of Patricks, another stevedoring company, and brought in scab labour. Following a deal worked out in the courts, the union brokered a wholesale speed-up in material handling, vastly reducing manning levels, including the removal of safety observers from straddle cranes, and increasing the use of casual labour.

The agreement eliminated 625 jobs out of 1,400 at Patricks, scrapped 100 working conditions, enforced greater “flexibility” and pushed up container handling rates from 18 to 27 per crane operator per hour. It imposed a new performance-based salary system, scrapping overtime and other penalty payments.

The union’s strategy was summed in the slogan “MUA here to stay.” Its sole concern was to reinforce the union’s position as the agency through which every attack on maritime jobs and conditions has been administered.

The MUA then agreed to similar conditions across the waterfront, including at PO Ports, which has since been absorbed into POAGS. Over the past 13 years, conditions have been further eroded through union-negotiated enterprise bargaining.

What is underway at POAGS today is part of a broader agenda being implemented by the Gillard government with the collaboration of the unions to implement the further restructuring demanded by the corporate elite to render Australian-based operations “internationally competitive” amid the deepening global economic crisis. This involves the wholesale

dismantling of workers' conditions, particularly the removal of all impediments to job "flexibility."

POAGS provocatively followed the lead of Qantas, which earlier shut down its entire fleet and threatened a general lockout, triggering a similar intervention by the government and three airline unions to cancel all industrial action and submit to FWA arbitration.

In another warning of what is being prepared behind the scenes in the POAGS talks, the Qantas engineers' union this week accepted Qantas's 3 percent pay ceiling—a pay cut in real terms—and dropped all opposition to the company's restructuring and outsourcing plans.

One Patricks worker interviewed by the WSWs this week defended the MUA's decision to suspend the industrial action at POAGS. Reflecting the union's justifications, he said we had to understand that the Labor government and the unions were trying to save Labor's industrial laws from companies like Qantas that were pushing for changes. He argued that Labor's Fair Work legislation was not as bad as the previous Howard government's Work Choices laws.

In reality, as demonstrated by the Qantas and POAG disputes, Labor's legislation not only prohibits nearly all industrial action, as did Howard's laws. It also permits employers to impose lockouts and gives the Labor government and its Fair Work tribunal broad powers to order a cessation of any industrial action that threatens to harm a major company or wider profit interests.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the interests of workers will inevitably be sold out, if the dispute is left in the hands of the union. POAGS workers should begin to organise independently by forming their own rank-and-file committees and turn out to other sections of workers such as those at Qantas facing similar attacks. A political struggle against the Labor government necessitates an alternative program: the fight for a workers' government to take the control of society out of the hands of the tiny financial and corporate elite and reorganise it on socialist lines to satisfy the pressing social needs of working people, not private profit.

*The author recommends:*

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