

Australian PM under pressure over mining “guest workers”

Patrick O'Connor
29 May 2012

The trade unions in Australia have mounted a reactionary, nationalist campaign against the Labor government’s announcement that it was approving an “enterprise migration agreement”, allowing 1,700 Chinese guest workers into the country to work on the Roy Hill Iron Ore project. The affair has raised further speculation about Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s ability to cling to office, amid sharp divisions in the Labor caucus over the issue.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced the guest worker scheme last Friday. Enterprise migration agreements were first proposed during Treasurer Wayne Swan’s 2011 budget speech, but the \$9.5 billion Roy Hill project in Western Australia, developed by a consortium led by Australia’s wealthiest individual Gina Rinehart, is the first to win government approval. The 1,700 imported workers will represent about 20 percent of the 8,500 construction workforce employed over three years. Roy Hill executives have insisted that the guest workers will receive the same wages, working conditions, and safety standards as Australian-nationals.

Shortly after Bowen’s public announcement, Gillard met with senior trade union bureaucrats for a pre-scheduled “manufacturing roundtable” and reportedly told them she was “furious” with the agreement. The prime minister’s office also apparently suggested that Gillard had first learned about the Roy Hill deal just two days earlier, after she returned from the NATO summit in the US. The prime minister appeared to be suggesting that she had been “set up” by Bowen and Resources Minister Martin Ferguson, both supporters of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd who Gillard ousted in an inner party coup in 2010.

Bowen responded by insisting that he had informed the prime minister’s office well in advance about the Roy Hill negotiations. The back-and-forth accusations, delivered via anonymous comments and tip offs in the media, underscored the political fragility of the minority Labor government.

The opposition expressed by the trade unions and sections of the Labor Party to the Roy Hill enterprise migration agreement

is aimed at promoting nationalism and xenophobia as a means of diverting opposition among workers to the wave of mass layoffs taking place. Labor and the trade unions have a long and filthy record on such campaigns, with the old “White Australia” immigration policy justified as a means of protecting Australian workers’ wages and conditions against the threat posed by Asian “coolies.”

Since the 2008 financial crash, more than 130,000 jobs have been destroyed in the Australian manufacturing sector alone. In every instance, the unions have worked to enforce the corporate restructuring demands, delivering “orderly closures” of factories and sabotaging any move by workers to defend jobs.

Australian Workers Union national secretary Paul Howes feigned outrage that Australian workers were not being offered the 1,700 Roy Hill positions, describing the guest worker arrangement as “sheer lunacy.” Last year, Howes assisted BlueScope Steel in eliminating more than 1,400 jobs, while again striving to divert widespread anger among workers into a chauvinist campaign for protectionist measures against China.

The enterprise migration scheme announcement was also condemned by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Dave Oliver, who declared that “mining billionaires aren’t interested in spreading the benefits of the mining boom to all and we think it’s a reprehensible situation that our Australian workers are being overlooked.” Oliver formerly served as chief of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which has played the central role in facilitating corporate Australia’s sweeping restructuring drive in recent years. The list of mass layoffs and wage cutting deals imposed by Oliver and the AMWU in recent years is too long to detail in full, but it includes: Ford, Toyota, Holden, APV Auto Components and numerous other car component plants, Shell’s Clyde refinery, Prysmian, Boeing, PaperlinX paper mill, Visy, and numerous construction projects, including the West Gate Bridge and Pluto.

The trade unions also bear responsibility for the appalling working conditions in the mining industry. Mining projects like

Roy Hill have difficulty in finding enough skilled workers, despite rising unemployment in virtually all non-mining sectors of the economy, because it is impossible for many workers to accept these positions. To do so often requires moving to remote areas in Western Australia and Queensland, where renting a modest home can cost thousands of dollars a week and where there is no basic infrastructure for families, such as schools and recreation facilities. Alternatively, workers can accept “fly in, fly out” arrangements, working extended shifts for long periods of time away from home. This, however, is extracting a devastating social toll, with mounting family breakups and social problems including gambling and alcoholism.

The unions’ chauvinist campaign was echoed within the Labor government by the so-called “lefts” led by Senator Doug Cameron. Previously AMWU national secretary, Cameron played a key role under the 1983-1996 Hawke-Keating Labor governments in helping smash up many of the traditionally most militant sectors of the working class. On the enterprise migration issue, Cameron is now working with right-wing, anti-immigrant Labor backbencher Kelvin Thomson. “We will end up with a situation where we have foreign companies using foreign workforces to send our resources in foreign ships to foreign countries for the use and enjoyment of foreign customers,” Thomson declared yesterday.

The Greens, the minority government’s key prop in parliament, also weighed in. “Australia’s migration program has been outsourced to big business at the expense of Australian families and workers,” deputy leader Adam Bandt declared. While giving support to the unions’ campaign, the Greens have also reassured the mining companies that they do not oppose enterprise migration agreements and merely want greater oversight over the approval process.

Gillard shifted her stance on the enterprise migration scheme in an attempt to placate different constituencies. No doubt keen to ensure the unions’ continued support for her leadership, Gillard first told them that she was “furious” over the Roy Hill agreement. AWU chief and Labor powerbroker Paul Howes was instrumental in installing her in office in June 2010 and remains an element of the so-called “praetorian guard” that is preventing, at least for now, another leadership challenge being mounted.

Immediately after her meeting with the union bureaucracy, however, she came under pressure from business and the mining industry. Gillard only became prime minister after the mining corporations waged a ferocious campaign against Rudd. Even before the 2010 coup, Gillard and Swan were working out a deal with BHP, Rio Tinto, and Xstrata to junk Rudd’s proposed Resource Super Profits Tax.

While faithfully advancing the interests of the major mining transnationals, however, Gillard and her ministers have attempted some populist criticisms of selected mining billionaires, notably Clive Palmer and Gina Rinehart, who both run privately-owned mining companies and have close ties with the Liberal Party. Desperate to regain some degree of public support, the Labor government has absurdly sought to present itself as the defender of “working families”, while accusing the opposition of representing vested interests and the ultra-wealthy. Gillard has accused opposition leader Tony Abbott of being “Gina Rinehart’s butler.”

Gillard’s conflicting priorities have led to another debacle for the Labor government. The prime minister now insists that she supports the Roy Hill enterprise migration agreement, but will introduce new procedures for future guest worker arrangements to give priority to “Australian jobs.” This has satisfied no-one, however, with business and the media complaining about additional “red tape” holding up lucrative mining projects.

The working class must reject the nationalist posturing of the unions and defend the rights of workers internationally to live and work in any country of their choosing while enjoying both decent wages and working conditions and full citizenship rights. Jobs, wages and conditions in the mining industry and across the economy can be defended only by those measures that advance the struggle to unite the working class across all national, ethnic and religious divisions against capitalism. What is required is a common political fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies against big business and finance capital, and against the Labor Party and trade union apparatuses that serve their interests.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact