

Australia: Asciano to slash hundreds of waterfront jobs

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Transport and stevedoring company Asciano announced last month that it will axe 270 positions from its 511-strong workforce at Port Botany in Sydney, by introducing automated straddle cranes at its Patrick-operated terminal. The cranes, to be fully operational by 2014, will cut costs by an estimated \$50 million a year.

Asciano's decision, which is directly in line with the restructuring agenda of the Gillard Labor government, was made knowing that the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) will not defend the jobs.

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin claimed the announcement was a "surprise." The job cuts, he declared, had not been raised during almost two years of enterprise agreement negotiations with the union at four of the company's cargo terminals.

Crumlin's claim to be surprised is hardly plausible, given the union's long-standing collaboration with government and employers to slash waterfront jobs. Similar automated processes were introduced, via MUA "consultation," at Patrick's Brisbane container terminal in 2007. The union is currently negotiating automation plans with two other stevedoring companies—DP World and Hutchinson—at Port Botany.

In fact, the attack on the Asciano workers is a direct outcome of the enterprise deal to which Crumlin referred. During a long-running dispute, Asciano threatened to lock out MUA members at three ports in response to limited industrial action.

Following an intervention by Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten, the union called off all industrial action and accepted "conciliation" in the government's Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal. The resulting five-year enterprise agreements, finalised in June, and covering four ports, delivered all of Asciano's demands.

The union's pay claim was cut from 10 percent per year to an average 4.45 percent annually, conditional on commitments to "improve productivity." These included recognising Asciano's right "to determine the amount of supplementary employees required"—i.e., the removal of limitations on casual or contract labour.

Port workers are bitterly opposed to casualisation because it eliminates full-time employment and totally subordinates them to market demand, imposing irregular hours, on a 24/7 on-call basis. Before 1992, there were no casuals in Australian ports. Today, up to 49 percent of the workers are casuals.

Asciano hailed the Patrick agreements because they "maintained the company's fundamental right to manage its business." For its part, the MUA claimed the deal demonstrated "what can be achieved under the Fair Work Act." The federal Labor government's Act contains no-strike provisions that are used to straightjacket workers, and enshrines the trade unions as labour bargaining agencies.

The MUA national secretary told an International Shipping Conference on August 7 that the union would use "every legal, political, industrial and commercial step available" to oppose the company's automation plan at Botany. This could include, Crumlin declared, an International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) campaign against Asciano.

This was empty bluster. Like their Australian counterparts, ITF affiliates are involved in never-ending workplace restructuring to make their employers "internationally competitive." In 2011, for example, the General Confederation of Labor in France signed off on a new collective agreement that cleared the way for far-reaching port "reform." This involved pension cuts and the partial privatisation of the ports.

Crumlin's rhetoric soon evaporated after the

Australian Financial Review denounced him in an August 9 editorial. The editorial called on Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government to “make clear that this campaign is not acceptable because holding the line against productivity increases hurts everyone.”

On the same day, the *Australian* reported that Workplace Relations Minister Shorten had already telephoned Crumlin. Crumlin told the newspaper that Shorten had quizzed him over whether he was opposed to automation on the waterfront. Crumlin insisted the union would negotiate over the introduction of the technology but Asciano wanted to proceed without negotiation.

For his part, Shorten indicated his support for the company’s plans, while advising it to work through the MUA. He told the *Australian*: “When you have big change, you are always best if you are taking your employees with you. I don’t think you need to go to business school to know that.”

The next day, Crumlin issued a statement declaring that media reports suggesting that an international boycott was being planned against Asciano were “false.” This was followed by an August 13 letter from Crumlin assuring the *Australian Financial Review*’s readers that “any international campaign” would be only “directed at public, customer and shareholder awareness.”

“For the record, the MUA and previously the Waterside Workers Federation have reached agreement for many decades on the introduction of automation. This is about Asciano deliberately misleading its workforce and any decision to impose automation without negotiation will be opposed,” Crumlin wrote.

In other words, Crumlin’s “campaign” consists of working with the Labor government to convince the company that ongoing collaboration with the MUA offers the best means to achieve its objectives.

Between 1987 and 1991, under the Hawke Labor government’s “waterfront reform” program, the union helped impose sweeping restructuring across the country’s ports. Crane container movements increased from 14 to 23 per hour and full-time employment halved from 8,300 to 3,800.

In 1998, the waterfront “reform” agenda was further advanced when the MUA brokered a deal to end a six-week waterfront confrontation with Patrick Stevedoring and the Liberal government of John Howard. The MUA

agreement eliminated 650 permanent jobs—nearly half Patrick’s workforce—increased crane rates to up to 26 an hour, and allowed greater use of casuals. Hailed as a victory by the MUA and its supporters, the deal served as a benchmark that was imposed across all ports.

Since then, every MUA-negotiated enterprise agreement has imposed the employers’ demands for greater workplace “flexibility,” downsizing, casualisation and erosion of working conditions.

The ongoing attack on Australian port workers is part of a global assault against all workers, including in transport, aviation and mining, which has accelerated since the international financial crisis began in 2008. A fight to defend jobs and conditions will only take place through a break from the union and the independent mobilisation of workers in a political struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies. This includes the use of advanced technology to lighten the load of workers, rather than destroy jobs and conditions.



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