

Australian police move to break building workers' picket

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Police have commenced an operation to break a picket line at a major Melbourne building site after the Grocon construction company flatly rejected a call by the Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal for a two-week “cooling off” period.

About 100 Victorian state police officers, some of them dressed in riot gear, massed at the Myer-Colonial First site from 3 a.m. yesterday to “take control” after late-night talks brokered by Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten broke down.

Commander Rick Nugent said police had escorted some workers into the site. About 500 workers who arrived to resume the picket were also confronted by a large wire fence erected by police around the project. Nevertheless, union officials later dispersed most of the workers, urging them to avoid a “violent confrontation”.

The previous night, Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) officials Dave Noonan and Bill Oliver had sat down with Grocon chief executive Daniel Grollo in the federal Labor government’s FWA tribunal for more than four hours in a bid to end the dispute.

But Grollo dismissed a recommendation by FWA president Iain Ross, and a personal plea by Shorten, to suspend legal action against the CFMEU for 14 days, in return for the union shutting down the picket while talks continued. Grollo declared: “The concept that the illegal blockade and intimidation is only to be temporarily lifted is unacceptable.” He later announced that Grocon would sue the union for millions of dollars in damages.

Shorten had requested the talks after riot police, using capsicum spray, mounted horses and batons, failed on Tuesday to break the picket. Shorten attacked the “ugly scenes”, accusing workers of “intimidation, violence

and thuggery”. He demanded that the CFMEU enforce Supreme Court orders obtained by the company outlawing picketing at four projects.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard had also denounced the workers’ resistance, declaring: “If they want to make a point, there are ways of making a point peacefully.” Gillard, who has a record of accusing construction workers of violence, said such conduct would never be tolerated. “Violence is always wrong in whatever setting,” she said.

On Friday morning, workers again defied the Supreme Court order and rallied at the site, anticipating that the assembled contingent of riot police would make a frontal assault on the picket. There was no confrontation, at least for now, with the police reportedly using a tunnel to escort workers on to the site.

Grollo’s rejection of a “cooling off period”—a time-tested method used to take the heat out of disputes so that trade unions can work behind the scenes to stitch up a deal—shocked the union officials. CFMEU Victorian secretary Bill Oliver told the media: “We were quite happy to go there tomorrow morning to tell those people (picketing) ... go back to work and then see where we go for the next two weeks.”

According to the CFMEU, the dispute was sparked when the company reneged on a deal, as part of a four-year enterprise agreement signed in June, to allow the union to nominate health and safety delegates on the site.

However, Grocon’s determination to escalate the dispute points to it being part of a broader agenda by major corporate players, demanding a more draconian industrial relations regime designed to give employers complete control over all aspects of the workplace.

The central demand by corporate chiefs in a wave of

disputes—from last year’s threatened Qantas lockout, when the carrier grounded its fleet, to the offensive by waterfront and mining companies—has been an unfettered “right to manage”, that is, the right to override workers’ conditions and rights at will.

This campaign is being sharply escalated as the Australian mining boom begins to collapse, deepening the slump throughout most of the economy. Mining projects are beginning to be cancelled because of an economic downturn in China and falling global commodity prices. In the past month, iron ore prices have fallen by 25 percent, to a three-year low.

The corporate media is calling for measures to drive down wages and conditions in line with the cuts being imposed on workers in Europe, America and internationally.

An *Australian Financial Review* editorial on Thursday said Grollo had blamed “union activities” for increasing business costs in Victoria by 30 percent. The editorial declared: “This is completely unacceptable, and the federal and state governments and the union movement should immediately bring the union into line.”

The corporate establishment has insisted that the Gillard government use the extensive punitive powers of its Fair Work Building and Construction (FWBC) agency to help break the picket line. The aim is to inflict a decisive defeat on a key section of workers, as a launching pad for a sweeping offensive against all workers.

The FWBC, like its predecessor, the former Howard government’s Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), can impose heavy fines and jail terms on unions and workers. Shorten assured the corporate media that the FWBC “was looking into the case” and FWBC chief Leigh Johns said investigations had already begun that could lead to civil penalty proceedings against the CFMEU.

An editorial on Friday in the *Australian* insisted: “The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy industrial war with Grocon demands more than tough words from Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten in order to stop this illegal and reckless militancy spreading throughout the economy ... This behaviour is not only a test for the government’s Fair Work system, it is also a test for the labour movement and the Labor government.”

Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu wrote to Gillard calling for amendments to federal legislation to deregister unions whose members breach state Supreme Court orders. Currently, federal law allows for deregistration after breaches of orders by federal courts and tribunals. Baillieu warned of “serious consequences for our economy, our reputation as a place to invest and general respect for the rule of the law if proper steps are not taken at a national level.”

This call is a warning. In 1986, the Hawke-Keating Labor government, with the full support of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Building Workers Industrial Union, the forerunner of the CFMEU, deregistered the Builders Labourers Federation to intimidate workers and break resistance to Labor’s far-reaching assault on workplace rights and conditions.

The Building Industrial Group (BIG), an alliance of four unions covering 150,000 construction workers and tradesmen in Victoria, this week threatened to sanction a state-wide stoppage, but emphasised this would only take place if police again used violence against picketers.

The unions will block any serious fight against the renewed offensive against construction workers’ conditions and rights, because that would mean an all-out struggle against the Gillard government and its Fair Work industrial relations regime, which the unions police.



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