

# Australia: Union/Grocon collusion against building workers

Terry Cook, Peter Symonds  
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Four weeks after police clashed with Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) officials and supporters outside the Melbourne Myer Emporium site, the union and the Grocon construction company are deliberately obscuring the issues at stake.

The union and the company are currently locked in closed-door talks in the Fair Work Australia tribunal. Construction workers are not privy to these discussions, because the real agendas being thrashed out in the tribunal are fundamentally opposed to their interests.

Both Grocon and the CFMEU claim to have the welfare of workers at heart. The union organised its “blockade” of Grocon building sites accusing the company of reneging on a verbal agreement to allow the union to appoint its officials as safety representatives.

Safety on building sites has become a critical issue, as governments and corporations in Australia and around the world attempt to offload the economic crisis onto the backs of the working class, including by clawing back workplace health and safety conditions. The latest official statistics demonstrate that 30 workers died in the Australian construction industry during 2010-11—a figure second only to the number of deaths in agriculture. So far this year another 18 have died, with many more injured.

The CFMEU’s agenda, however, has nothing to do with workers’ safety. The union is instead preoccupied with ensuring its officials are installed in full-time positions, paid by the company, on large building sites. For decades, union bureaucrats have collaborated closely with major construction companies like Grocon, with their on-site officials functioning as industrial policemen to oversee the meeting of deadlines and the blocking of any wildcat actions.

The union organised the recent “blockades” as a stunt aimed at pressuring the company into maintaining the status quo. It clearly lacked any confidence that its officials would be elected if a democratic vote were held. Significantly, the CFMEU called none of the workers at the Grocon sites in Melbourne, Sydney and other cities out on strike. On the contrary, the protests were tightly-managed affairs, mainly comprising CFMEU officials and their close supporters. The union only began to involve wider sections of workers when police attempted to break up the Melbourne blockade on August 28.

Moreover, calling a strike would have brought the union into conflict with the federal Labor government whose Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation bans virtually all industrial action except within enterprise bargaining periods. On September 5, Prime Minister Julia Gillard intervened directly, denouncing the blockades as “grossly unacceptable” and “illegal” giving the green light for punitive action against the union and anyone involved. The union has backed Labor’s anti-working class FWA laws, and the last thing it wants is a conflict with the Gillard government, which it has supported to the hilt.

As for Grocon, it is no more concerned about safety or workers’ rights than the CFMEU. The company wants to nominate its own stooges as safety representatives and to pressure workers into voting for them. Under conditions of a sharpening economic slump, Grocon regards the CFMEU’s services as an unnecessary overhead and is spearheading a drive by construction companies to take full control over construction sites.

Grocon is being backed by the Victorian state government, which recently enacted legislation that prohibits construction companies tendering for

infrastructure projects from permitting union-appointed safety representatives—a system that has been blamed for causing cost blowouts and disputes on major projects. The state Liberal government has joined Grocon in punitive legal action against the union for damages, estimated at \$10 million.

In response, the CFMEU shut down its protest stunts on September 7 and has been in discussions with Grocon in the FWA tribunal since then to work out a new modus operandi with the construction companies. In comments last month to the *Herald Sun*, CFMEU official John Setka spelled out the union’s pro-business attitude, declaring: “Everyone has realised the unions and builders have to work together...why would we try to bite the hands that feeds us?”

This unholy alliance of unions, corporations and governments against the working class was cemented in the 1980s under the Accords imposed by the Hawke Labor government. These set the stage for a wholesale program of pro-market economic restructuring. The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU), now the CFMEU’s construction industry arm, played a key role in the smashing of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), which opened the door for an escalating assault on the conditions of building workers, including safety, such as ending the ban on working in wet weather.

The Labor government’s deregistration of the BLF was not aimed at the BLF leadership, which subsequently integrated itself into the BWIU, but against builders’ labourers—the most militant section of construction workers—and any genuine rank-and-file organisation on construction sites. In Melbourne, BWIU officials participated in a massive police operation that moved from site to site to force BLF members to sign over to the BWIU or face the sack.

The subsequent “struggles” of the CFMEU have been aimed at consolidating its position in the construction industry. In 2009, for example, the union exploited a dispute at the Westgate Bridge upgrade project to broker a deal with construction company John Holland to impose a no-strike agreement and allow the victimisation of strikers in exchange for partial coverage of the site. At the same time, the union has developed its own substantial and lucrative financial interests in the industry, becoming a major player in the property market through investments

from the \$16 billion CBUS superannuation scheme.

As construction workers have become increasingly alienated from the union, the various ex-left organisations have rushed to its defence. In the immediate aftermath of the CFMEU’s decision to unconditionally call off the blockades, Socialist Alliance in its *Green Left Weekly* hailed it for being “one of the most militant and effective unions in the country” and backed its campaign for the “right of union members to nominate and elect union shop stewards and health and safety representatives”. This was a total misrepresentation of the facts. The CFMEU was fighting for the “right” to impose its selected officials on building sites, regardless of whether workers agreed or not, not for the right of workers to conduct a democratic vote.

The outcome of the FWA talks—whether it is the sidelining of the union or an even greater union collusion with the construction companies—will set the stage for an escalating offensive against the basic rights of building workers.

Construction workers cannot afford to leave safety in the hands of either the company or the union. On this, as on every issue concerning the interests of building workers, what is required is a decisive break from the unions and the establishment of rank-and-file committees led by trusted representatives, democratically elected by the workers themselves. Such committees must turn to other sections of building workers, along with workers in manufacturing, public servants, teachers and others being driven into struggle against redundancies, sackings and cuts to wages and conditions, in the fight for a political and industrial campaign against the austerity policies of the Gillard Labor government and its state counterparts. The campaign must be grounded on a socialist perspective, aimed at establishing a workers’ government that will nationalise the major banks and corporations, including the large construction companies, and place them under the democratic control of the working class.



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