

Union prepares to sell out Western Australian port dispute

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is preparing to shut down a long-running dispute by more than 130 Fremantle Ports' workers over the terms of a new three-year enterprise work agreement at the Kwinana Bulk Terminal in Western Australia (WA).

The facility, located south of the state capital Perth, is an important hub. It handles an estimated \$3 million a day in trade, particularly commodities from the state's mining and resources sector being exported to China and other parts of Asia.

Workers at the terminal, including mooring, security, stevedores and quarantine collection officers, went on strike for four days at the beginning of October in support of a pay increase and roster changes to reduce working hours.

Current rosters are based on a 40-hour week, achieved by working four days of consecutive 12-hour shifts, followed by four days off. Inadequate staffing levels, however, result in workers being compelled to do significant overtime or work on their rostered days off. Some have worked up to 72 hours a week and 120 hours over a fortnight, resulting in dangerous levels of fatigue.

Safety is a major issue for port workers. The continuous drive to cut costs and ramp up productivity has contributed to a spate of fatalities over recent years on the docks. The latest death occurred in September, when a 56-year-old worker was crushed at the Port of Newcastle in NSW.

A worker at the Kwinana Bulk Terminal told the *World Socialist Web Site* that conditions on the job

were "exhausting and dangerous." Another declared that "fatigue management is non-existent." He added: "After working long shifts and many hours straight the potential for accidents and deaths is there. I'm surprised it hasn't happened yet."

The MUA, however, has already conceded some of the main demands made close to a year ago. These included for a roster change to four days on, with six days off—conditions that workers at other firms operating at the Kwinana terminal already have. MUA state assistant secretary Will Tracy confirmed this month that the union had taken the demand "off the table." Instead, the MUA has made a claim for a reduction in the working week to 39 hours.

The union has also dropped the original claim for a 20 percent pay increase over three years and agreed to accept just 12 percent. Unable to stitch up a deal even on the basis of the reduced claims, the MUA, after 11 fruitless months of "good faith" bargaining, called the four-day stoppage this month.

The limited strike had no other purpose but to defuse anger among rank-and-file workers and give the union more time to cut a deal with the company. The state Liberal government of Premier Colin Barnett immediately stepped in, however, to condemn the demand for reduced hours as "outrageous and out of line with modern conditions."

Transport minister Troy Buswell also slammed the striking workers. "These sorts of tactics will eventually creep into industrial battlegrounds and it won't just be the ports having to worry about it. It will be a whole range of other sectors where this new industrial

paradigm delivers disastrous outcomes,” he said.

On the first day of the strike, the state government dispatched 60 police to the Kwinana port, including mounted officers, members of the dog squad and a mobile police command centre. Police temporarily blocked a small contingent of off-duty port workers who attempted to join the picket outside the terminal.

The show of force was intended to intimidate the Kwinana workforce and to send a message that the state government was prepared to act ruthlessly against any section of workers attempting to defend their conditions.

The Barnett government acted with the knowledge it would have the backing of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her federal Labor government, which has previously used its draconian Fair Work Australia industrial laws to block strike action. The Labor government has been pushing for the restructuring of the ports and transport infrastructure to meet corporate demands for greater productivity, especially in the mining and resources sector.

The MUA’s record demonstrates that it will not wage any genuine campaign to defend the safety and conditions of workers at Kwinana or anywhere else. In 2011, the MUA ended industrial action by workers at P&O Automotive and General Stevedoring (POAGS) and Patrick after doing everything it could to broker deals with the companies that made substantial concessions on workplace flexibility and reduced wage claims.

Unsafe conditions on the waterfront are the legacy of decades of union-negotiated enterprise agreements that have delivered the ever-greater productivity and cost-cutting demanded by the stevedoring companies and port authorities.

The MUA opened the door for this onslaught by its betrayal of the 1998 waterfront dispute, when Patrick Stevedoring sacked the company’s 1,400-strong workforce and brought in scab labour. Following a deal worked out in the courts, the union brokered a wholesale speed-up in material handling, the reduction

of manning levels, the removal of safety observers from straddle cranes, and the greater use of casual labour. In exchange, the companies ensured the MUA’s place in the industry as enforcers of the ongoing restructuring program.

Fully aware of this record, Ports Australia CEO David Anderson pointed to the rapidly slowing resources boom to urge the union to act more decisively to end the Kwinana dispute. He declared: “Unlike in previous decades, maritime unions have failed to take a long-term view of their industry and realise that unreasonable claims like this will make Australia’s trades uncompetitive.”

The assault on the conditions of port workers will intensify with the unravelling of the mining boom as commodity prices fall and demand in China and Asia continues to slow. If the dispute is left in the hands of the union, the Fremantle workers will be isolated and betrayed, encouraging employers to intensify their offensive across the waterfront.

The only alternative is for waterfront workers to form their own independent rank-and-file committee and to turn to other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally facing attack. Such a struggle involves an industrial and political fight against the pro-market agenda of the state and federal government based on a socialist perspective to reorganise society to meet the needs of the majority not the profits of the wealthy few.



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