

Australian unions promote anti-Chinese nationalism

Our reporters
1 August 2015

Australia's trade unions are seeking to divert the growing concerns of workers over rising unemployment, falling wages and declining living standards into a chauvinist campaign against a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed with China by the Abbott government.

Union leaders are staging protests in Australia's main cities to denounce the FTA, accusing Prime Minister Tony Abbott of "selling out Australian jobs" to foreigners, above all, Chinese companies and workers.

At the latest rally, held in Sydney yesterday, between 1,000 and 2,000 workers were brought off worksites, notably the city's large Barangaroo construction project, to hear union speakers tub-thump against the Liberal-National government for "selling off our sovereignty."

While the union bureaucrats claim that their campaign is not racist, they have singled out the FTA with China, initialled on June 17, even though the government has concluded similar FTAs with Japan and Korea, and is locked in negotiations to finalise the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade bloc directed against China.

Backed by a resolution passed by the opposition Labor Party's national conference last weekend, the unions are demanding that the China FTA be amended in parliament to insert guarantees of "Australian" jobs.

This agitation serves to pit Australian workers against their fellow Chinese workers, effectively blaming them for the sweeping destruction of jobs by mining and manufacturing companies in response to the deepening global slump and collapse of export commodity prices.

The unions oppose a sidepiece Investment Facilitation Agreement that reportedly allows Chinese investors to bring in Chinese workers on projects worth more than \$150 million, without first advertising for

local workers.

Far from seeking to forge unity with the more than 400 million workers in China, by fighting for better wages and conditions for those employed in Australia, the unions are mounting a divisive campaign that gives succor to openly racist, anti-Chinese groups that are being given increasing prominence by the corporate media.

Among those in the crowd at yesterday's rally outside Sydney's state parliament house were supporters of a right-wing grouping, the recently formed Party for Freedom, which denounces Chinese investment in Australia as an "invasion."

Addressing the gathering, Australian Workers Union (AWU) state secretary Russ Collison, pointed to the fact that about 800,000 workers are now officially unemployed in Australia, but declared: "This is not just about jobs. This is about our sovereignty. Most important it's about our sovereignty."

Collison called the FTA an act of "economic terrorism," eliciting a shout from someone in the crowd: "Chinese terrorist dogs!" Collison responded: "Absolutely. Unless you work in a warehouse or a tourist guide, there'll be no work in this country."

The AWU official rattled off a list of workplaces shut down in Australia in recent years, including oil refineries, the steel industry, ship building and aluminum. "I mean where does it stop?" he asked.

Collison invoked the spectre of a Chinese takeover of Australia. "Chinese will be coming in, they'll be flying in and flying out and the unemployment will be ridiculous," he stated. "Good, fair dinkum Aussies, good, hard working Australians are being done over and this is an absolute disgrace."

Naturally, Collison was silent on the part played by the AWU, which has systematically suppressed

opposition by workers to these closures, and worked hand-in-glove with the companies involved to facilitate “orderly closures.”

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) national president Michael O’Connor, asked: “What’s this Chinese Free Trade Agreement about? It’s about our way of life, it’s about the things that make this country great ... We are not going to allow some lazy, incompetent government to sell off our sovereignty because they know nothing better.”

This homage to “great” Australia, equating that claim with the defence of working class conditions, epitomises the “White Australia” protectionism of the unions. They have long sought to divide workers in Australia from their brothers and sisters across Asia, and tie them to the profit requirements of local big business.

For all the hypocritical references to defending workers’ jobs, the union campaign seeks to protect and shore up Australian-based companies. In a media release, O’Connor condemned the China FTA for putting “Australian manufacturers at a competitive disadvantage” and opening the door for Chinese products to “flood our market.”

Anxious to deflect criticism from the corporate elite, and Prime Minister Abbott, that their campaign is “xenophobic,” the union speakers were at pains to deny that their campaign was racist. But television and radio ads funded by the unions specifically charge the Abbott government with “trading away Aussie jobs” to China.

The campaign alleges that the FTA “will allow Chinese companies to sue Australian governments that pass laws which affect their profits,” without mentioning the similar Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) clauses in other so-called “free trade” deals and Washington’s TPP.

The ad campaign, sponsored by the Australian Council of Trade Unions and eight prominent unions, also signals a renewed drive to channel the anger of workers toward the Abbott government and its austerity program back behind the election of yet another pro-business Labor government.

Collison told the Sydney rally: “I understand that there was a bit of hostility towards the last Labor government. But if we put this [Liberal-National] mob back into government, I’ll tell you what, I think it’s about time we went off shore.”

Members of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance (SA) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia participated in the Sydney rally, lining up with the anti-Chinese agitation. SA representatives circulated an anti-China FTA petition.

There is no doubt that the Abbott government, like the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments before it, has pursued FTAs and the TTP on behalf of the most powerful sections of the financial and corporate elite. Speaking at a Boao Forum for Asia Sydney conference yesterday, Abbott said the signing of the China FTA was “a decisive moment” in Australia’s economic future.

However, while intent on continuing to cash in on China’s large markets for as long as possible, the Abbott government has also stirred anti-Chinese chauvinism this year, imposing harsher penalties and fines for unauthorised real estate purchasers by foreign citizens.

The trade union-Labor agitation against the China FTA dovetails with full support, alongside the Abbott government, for Washington’s “pivot” to Asia to encircle China militarily and assert US hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region.

Virtually the entire political establishment has lined up behind US plans to confront China, including over Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. If war breaks out, Australia will fight alongside the US against China, with Australia functioning as a staging base for American operations.

Workers’ interests, in Australia, China, the US or anywhere else, do not lie in nationalism and chauvinism, which fuels the drive to war, but in unifying their struggles across the globe against the capitalist profit system itself, which is the source of the drive to war and the offensive against working class jobs and conditions on every continent.



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