

Sacked Hutchison workers speak out

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with sacked Hutchison Port Australia workers at Sydney's Port Botany terminal over the past two days. Workers described Hutchison's high-productivity regime and how the company lured workers from various stevedoring companies, as well as airline, manufacturing and logistics businesses, promising them long-term employment.

Hutchison, the world's largest stevedoring company, invested \$700 million setting up new Australian terminals. It established a "Greenfields Agreement" with the Maritime Union Australia (MUA), which workers had to sign before commencing work.

Martin, a former maintenance supervisor at Patrick stevedores, described the recruitment process. "I remember the first sentence the HR manager said: 'Hutchison is in 52 ports around the world and this is going to be the most secure move you ever make.'"

"We all left good-paying permanent jobs with good rosters, on the promise that once Hutchison got up and running we would move onto good rosters, but it never happened. We all took a substantial pay cut to get it up and running."

"There were no casuals at Hutchison. We were all permanent but we were on an irregular roster, so you would get a text message each day before work to tell you if you were working. They treated us like casuals. In maintenance we had a semi-roster because I stood up for that and got the roster in place. That's why I believe I was sacked. That night the maintenance manager went and told the three maintenance workers who were locked in: 'You can forget about your roster now it's going to be completely irregular, we will send you a text message whenever we want you to work.'"

"We averaged six days a week and were still struggling to do all the maintenance. I can't look at one piece of equipment in this place and tell you that its maintenance is up to scratch.

"You don't need to be a rocket scientist. You count all those cranes, four key cranes, six blocks of two automatic stacking cranes, eight straddle carriers, four reach stackers, not to mention the forklifts, and ask yourself how are ten people going to maintain them? Yet they still sacked 40 percent of the workforce."

Noel, who has over 20 years' experience as a dockworker in Ireland and Australia, said he was "head-hunted" by Hutchison from DP World. The decision was "agonising," he said.

"Every job here was permanent. That's what attracted a lot of the workers. I was semi-casual at DP World, waiting in line to get permanent. The offer of a permanent job with the new technology was still a big decision for me to make.

"We were told it was going to be the biggest terminal operator in Australia and they would expand. You were going to have a great job here for the rest of your life. Then two years down the line, you're sacked for no reason.

"There were about 25 workers from different terminals. I assume they were all headhunted and they all left good jobs. It's just unbelievable what happened.

"There will be a lot of stress, especially on the younger workers that haven't been in the industry. They thought they had a secure job and thought, 'Now's the time I get a mortgage, now I'll have a baby, now I'm in a good job, I'll be right for my future.' There's quite a few. This can break up marriages.

"We heard that 5,000 applied, so we felt it was a privilege to be selected. That's no disrespect to any of the other applicants that didn't get it, and I'm sure if they're looking at the paper today they're thinking, 'Thank god I didn't get that job! That could have been me.'"

"We put up with a lot—nights, weekends, early starts. You miss out on a lot of family things but we're

willing to do that to get it up and running.

“I’m turning 54 this year and so it’s going to be tough to get work in an industry that’s my bread and butter.”

Daniel has been a dockworker for 15 years in Australia and New Zealand. “Every worker that came here left a good job. I worked with Noel at DP World. When I applied and finally got a job here I thought, that’s awesome, it’s a permanent position, good money, good bunch of guys to work with, I knew a lot of them from DP, and that was it.

“After I got the job my wife and I bought a house—we’ve only had that for a year—and we got married just six months ago. We thought we were set for life, as you think you would be, and we were going to start trying for a family. Our mortgage isn’t too bad, but it’s a mortgage. It doesn’t matter how much it is, you still have to pay it or you’ll lose it. It’s a godsend that my wife is very supportive.”

Describing the redundancy process, Daniel said: “They just said we’re losing money and we’re going to rank you on performance, on attitude. How can you rank someone on attitude!”



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