

Hutchison Australia waterfront workers continue strike action

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Waterside workers from Hutchison Port Australia remain on strike and are picketing the global stevedoring corporation's terminals at Port Botany in Sydney and Brisbane over its dismissal of 97 of its 224-strong national workforce last Thursday. The sacked workers were informed by late-night text messages and emails that they had been made redundant (see: "Hutchison Ports axes half its Australian workforce").

Early morning mass meetings of Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members today decided to remain on strike in defiance of an interim Fair Work Commission (FWC) return-to-work issued late Friday and claims by Hutchison that the industrial action is "illegal."

Strikers and sacked Hutchison workers, along with off-shift maritime employees and other workers, are currently stopping trucks entering the Port Botany and Brisbane terminals. Protest rallies were held at both terminals during the weekend.

The strikers have explained that the assault was long-prepared by the multi-billion dollar company and would be used to further automate and casualise the workforce, both at Hutchison and other stevedoring companies (see: "Sacked Hutchison workers speak out"). Thousands of waterside workers' jobs have already been eliminated in Australia in the past 20 years, with the collaboration of the MUA.

While Hutchison workers have resolved to maintain their walkout—the Port Botany mass meeting went for over two hours—the union has already signalled that it will not fight to defend the jobs. Its perspective instead is to use the strike to put pressure on the company for negotiations over the terms of any redundancies.

MUA assistant national secretary Warren Smith declared last week that the union would "accept job cuts if the company could justify them ... If they're

genuine, we are prepared to come back with a range of creative solutions to get through whatever difficult times the company is confronting."

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin further underlined this appeal, pointing to the union's ongoing collaboration with Hutchison since the company established its Australian terminals during the past three years.

"The union and myself personally have worked closely with senior Hutchison management to ensure productive, flexible, safe and reliable working arrangements to allow the company to enter into a highly competitive market," Crumlin declared on the union's website.

Under Hutchison's "Greenfield's agreement" struck with the MUA, workers were paid a minimum 30-hour per week but had no permanent weekly roster and could be called in at any time. They were sent text messages at the end of each day, informing them whether they were working or not. Overtime would be paid only after an employee had worked more than his allocated annual hours.

The MUA is currently engaged in talks to finalise a new enterprise agreement with the rival stevedoring company DP World Australia that will limit annual pay rises to 2.6 percent, with a further 0.3 percent if productivity targets are met. DP World is seeking to automate its operations in Brisbane, inevitably producing job losses.

The MUA, which is attending an FWC hearing with Hutchison late today, has no fundamental differences with the cost-cutting measures. Whatever the FWC decision, the union will seek to ensure that any industrial action remains limited, while stitching up an agreement behind the backs of workers.

In recent years, many workers have had bitter

experiences of picket lines that unions have deliberately isolated, worn down and ultimately sold out. The MUA's "community assemblies" and legal manoeuvres are simply designed to give the appearance that the union is doing something.

The appearance of Labor Party leader and former Australian Workers Union national secretary Bill Shorten at Port Botany last Friday was aimed at giving a boost to the union. While condemning the way in which the sackings took place, he did not oppose the restructuring. "The idea that you just dismiss 100 plus people by text message is heartless, it's callous and it's stupid," he declared. It should be recalled that former Labor governments, with the assistance of the unions, have presided over the wholesale decimation of manufacturing industry.

The destruction of jobs at Hutchison is part of an avalanche of restructuring and job shedding that is taking place amid the slowdown of the Australian economy as commodity prices fall and Chinese growth slows. Total investment in Australian industry is expected to fall by 21 percent this financial year, including a 34 percent fall in mining and 24 percent in manufacturing.

Tens of thousands of jobs are being eliminated in mining, manufacturing industries, transport and the public sector, with the active collaboration of the trade union apparatus. The entire car industry is to be shut down by the end of 2017, with the unions pledging to ensure an "orderly closure"—that is, no resistance by workers.

The root cause of the accelerating destruction of jobs is the deepening crisis of global capitalism. In every country and every industry, companies are engaged in a dog-eat-dog struggle against their rivals for profits and market share, and insist that workers must pay the price.

No fight to defend jobs can even begin without a break from the unions, which defend the capitalist system and act on behalf of companies to ensure their "competitiveness." What is required is the development of genuine rank-and-file committees led by trusted representatives, democratically elected by maritime workers, to turn out to other sections of workers on the waterfront and in other industries, both in Australia and internationally, facing similar attacks.

The alternative to the never-ending corporate assault

on jobs, wages and working conditions is the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective, and the nationalisation under democratic workers' control of key strategic sectors of the economy. This must include the maritime, transport, mining and manufacturing industries, as well as the banks and financial institutions.

The right to a job, decent wages and working conditions can be established only in the fight for a workers' government. The key industries must be taken out of private hands and the economy rationally planned to provide for the social needs and rights of the population as a whole.



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