

Hutchison workers continue strike as Australian union calls for “negotiated” job cuts

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Hundreds of Hutchison Port workers in Brisbane and at Port Botany in Sydney continue to defy back-to-work orders from Australia’s Fair Work Commission and are maintaining strike action and pickets outside the global stevedoring company’s two container terminals.

The action, now in its fifth day, is in protest against Hutchison Port Australia’s late night sackings on Thursday, via text messages and emails, of 97 waterside workers, almost half the company’s national workforce. The job destruction is in order to slash operating costs and undercut its rivals DP World and the Asciano-owned Patrick stevedores.

Late yesterday, Fair Work Commission Deputy President Anna Booth extended an existing interim order banning all industrial action to include the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA).

A former Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union national secretary and Australian Council of Trade Unions vice president, Booth called on the union to “exercise responsible leadership,” and urge its members to honour the commission’s ruling. “I also ask them to consider the economic impact on the company of their actions,” she declared.

From the outset, the union has appealed to the company to allow it to present its own cost-cutting suggestions. Today it denied any involvement in the strike, while at the same time claiming that it was “fighting for justice.”

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin told the media that the union was not organising the picket and could not stop it. This was echoed by MUA assistant national secretary Warren Smith, who denied the union was organising strike action, telling Fairfax Media,

“We reject that position because we believe that we haven’t been engaging in any industrial action.”

These are categorical pledges to Fair Work Australia, Hutchison and Australia’s ruling elite that the union is strenuously opposed to any mobilisation of its 16,000-strong membership and will maintain its political stranglehold over the Hutchison workers.

ABC radio reported today that MUA Queensland branch secretary Bob Carnegie said that the “Brisbane picket line had been abandoned” and that it was “up to individuals to decide whether they would continue strike action.”

Carnegie then cynically declared, “We will stay for how long it takes—if it takes one more day fantastic, if it takes one more week ok, if it takes one more year that’s fine too.”

This is so much hot air and is designed to cover up the fact that the union has collaborated with the stevedoring companies in the systematic destruction of thousands of jobs and hard-won conditions on the waterfront during the past three decades.

The Fair Work directive, in fact, is precisely what the union wants and is a well-worn script followed by the trade union and labour apparatus. It allows the MUA to maintain its isolation of the sacked Hutchison workers, claiming national waterfront industrial action is impossible. It can appeal to the company to “negotiate” whilst wearing down workers’ fighting strength.

The script also involves posturing and lies by all manner of Labor politicians and union officials, attempting to blame Liberal governments for the decades-long assault on the working class.

Federal opposition leader Bill Shorten and various other state and federal Labor politicians have appeared

on picket lines. Shorten, as former national secretary of the Australian Workers Union and a cabinet member of the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, directly oversaw the axing of thousands of jobs.

Yesterday Queensland MUA secretary Bob Carnegie sought to whip up Australian nationalism and anti-Chinese rhetoric to divert from the class issues. He denounced the Chinese owner of the Hong Kong-based Hutchison Port Holdings, Li Ka-shing, declaring that he would not defeat Australian waterside workers because, “We are free Australians. We are free people in a free country and we will fight for our freedom.”

This reactionary demagoguery is designed to pit Australian workers against their Chinese and international class brothers and sisters and align workers with the Australian capitalist class. Australian companies have been just as ruthless in their assault on jobs and conditions as their counterparts in China and around the world.

Carnegie then gave the platform to two state Labor politicians—Queensland Treasurer Curtis Pitt and Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly Grace Grace—presenting them as friends of the Hutchison workers. Both were members of the last state Labor government, which was thrown out of office in a historic landslide after it destroyed thousands of public sector jobs. Pitt told the protest picket that the state Labor government had “learnt its lesson” and would “stand by the workers.”

MUA officials have compared the current dispute to the struggle provoked by the mass dismissal of waterside workers in 1998 by Patrick stevedores which the union hailed “a victory.” In reality, the MUA betrayal, which accepted the terms imposed by the courts, extricated the Howard Liberal government from a deep crisis and laid the basis for the decimation of jobs and conditions that totally transformed the waterfront. (See: “The Australian waterfront conflict: a political assessment”)

Federal and state Labor politicians have also seized on the Patrick confrontation to falsely posture as defenders of the Hutchinson workers. In the Senate yesterday, Labor senator Doug Cameron denounced the Abbott government’s federal industrial relations minister Eric Abetz, who last Friday said the text message dismissals of Hutchison workers had been “appropriate.” Cameron said the midnight text

messages and emails had “replaced balaclavas and dogs as the preferred method of sacking waterfront workers,” a reference to the 1998 Patrick’s dispute.

Cameron’s posturing is a fraud. Australian Labor governments—Hawke and Keating, from 1983–96, and Rudd and Gillard from 2007 until 2013—working with the active assistance of the trade unions presided over the axing of tens of thousands of waterfront, airline, car, steel and other jobs and the elimination of working conditions won in decades of struggle. During the 1998 dispute, Labor politicians continually trooped down to the pickets at the Patrick terminals to proclaim their support for the workers and to cover up the betrayal that was being prepared behind the scenes.

Serious political lessons need to be drawn by wharfies and other sections of the working class. The struggle to defend jobs requires, first and foremost, a political break from the trade unions and the Labor Party which have been responsible for the restructuring and devastation of whole sections of industry over the past three decades. Hutchinson workers need to form their own independent rank-and-file committees to defend all jobs and conditions and turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing similar attacks. This struggle like those of workers in mining, manufacturing and other industries requires a new political perspective—the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies. The banks and major corporations, including the stevedoring companies, must be nationalised under democratic workers’ control.

That is the program advocated by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers on the waterfront and in other industries to contact us to discuss how to carry forward such a struggle.



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