

Australian waterfront union betrays Hutchison strike

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Just as it did in betraying the 1998 waterfront dispute, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) last night used a ruling by a capitalist court to call off a decisive struggle by dock workers and their supporters against sackings.

While claiming a “victory,” as it did in 1998, the MUA sent the Hutchison Ports workers back to work at 6 a.m. today in Brisbane, and intended to do the same at 2 p.m. in Sydney, with many of them to lose their jobs, via company “consultation” with the trade union.

The sell-out may unravel. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, about 25 workers in Sydney due to return at 2 p.m., refused to do so after three workers were denied entry by security guards.

For seven days, Hutchison workers fought the dismissal of almost half the global conglomerate’s Australian container terminal workforce. They defied two return-to-work orders by the federal government’s Fair Work Commission (FWC) industrial tribunal.

Their stand had attracted growing sympathy and support from other workers and threatened to become a focus for wider discontent over the never-ending destruction of jobs and conditions. In Melbourne, striking Woolworths supermarket warehouse workers are also defying FWC return-to-work orders.

In the Federal Court last night, Justice Darryl Rangiah granted the MUA a temporary injunction, delaying for two weeks the sackings, which were to come into effect today, citing Hutchison’s failure to adequately “consult” with the union.

The MUA sought the ruling as a political circuit breaker, demobilising workers until the union can reach a rotten deal with Hutchison. The judge said the union had a “prima facie” case that the company breached its enterprise agreement with the MUA by sacking 97 workers by texts and email messages last week.

The MUA was so anxious to shut down the strike that it gave the court a legal undertaking to reimburse Hutchison for the wages of the sacked workers, and any other “damages” the company incurred during the two-week

period, if the court finally rules in Hutchison’s favour after the case resumes on August 31.

For the MUA to present this as a “victory,” or even a “reinstatement” of the sacked workers, is a total fraud. The union is pleading for Hutchison to undertake negotiations on how the union can assist it to impose all the job cuts it is demanding.

Addressing a gathering on Sydney’s Port Botany docks last night, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin urged workers to “celebrate” the “win,” but flatly declared that “people will go”—that is, workers will lose their jobs.

“So we’re back in, now we’ve got a position to negotiate,” Crumlin said. “We’ll negotiate on the basis that people go. If there’s no contracts, they go, but they have a chance to come back, and there’s an ability to find work somewhere else.”

In other words, the negotiations will aim to help the company ensure that “people go,” ostensibly because it does not have enough stevedoring contracts to retain them, with a chance of “coming back” if Hutchison has work for them.

As for “finding work somewhere else,” more than 800,000 workers are now officially unemployed in Australia. Most of the Hutchison workers signed up with the company because it seemed to offer the only hope of finding permanent work.

Crumlin declared that the union wanted to work with Hutchison, “in the interests of the enterprise,” to “rebuild their business” so that “we’ll go back in there and do our bloody jobs like workers do everywhere.”

This means that the MUA will intensify its collaboration with Hutchison to drive up its rate of exploitation of workers, and hence its profits, so that it can compete with its main Australian rivals, DP World and Asciano-Patricks. All three companies are introducing remotely-controlled automated cranes and other technology, halving their workforces in the process, in a further global restructuring of the ports at the expense of dockworkers’ jobs, conditions and basic rights around the world.

Crumlin’s remarks sum up the political perspective of the MUA and the entire trade union movement. For decades, the

unions have worked hand-in-glove with employers to impose their profit-making requirements, forcing workers throughout every industry to sacrifice thousands of jobs, as well as hard-won basic conditions.

In Australia, this union role became pivotal under the “accords” struck between the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Hawke Labor government during the 1980s, and intensified under the “enterprise bargaining” regime implemented by the Keating Labor government in the 1990s.

Today this offensive is accelerating amid a worsening economic breakdown of global and Australian capitalism, which initially erupted in the 2008 financial crisis and has now produced a sharp slowdown in China, international stagnation and a collapse of the mining export prices on which Australian capitalism depends.

At Port Botany last night, Crumlin again invoked the myth that the 1998 confrontation ended with a victory for workers. He declared: “We walked in the gates in ’98 and it was a very long and bitter dispute and we got on with our job.”

In reality, the 1998 outcome was a monumental betrayal of a six-week struggle against 2,000 mass sackings by Patricks, which paved the way for the devastation of the jobs, conditions and basic rights of dockworkers over the past 17 years. Not only did the MUA strike a deal with Patricks to eliminate 650 permanent jobs—nearly half its workforce. That set in motion an assault that, according to the federal government’s Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, has cut real unit costs by 42.1 percent since 1998–99, delivering the stevedoring giants bumper profits at the expense of workers.

In 1998 too, the MUA’s deal with Patricks was achieved via the intervention of the highest courts in the land, whose rulings served a definite political purpose. They rescued the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government from a deep political crisis, triggered by widespread public support for the sacked workers.

Similarly now, the Federal Court injunction was issued amid a daily-worsening crisis of Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s Coalition government, which is under escalating pressure from the corporate establishment to spearhead the kind of attack launched by Hutchison Ports—including mass sackings and the scrapping of permanency, minimum wages and after-hours penalty rates.

The Abbott government initially endorsed Hutchison’s method of unleashing sackings by text messages. But on Wednesday evening—the night before the Federal Court hearing—there was a clear sign that the government was desperate for a deal to be struck between Hutchison and the MUA. Employment Minister Eric Abetz issued a statement criticising Hutchison’s “method of communicating with workers,” saying it “has not helped this already difficult

situation.”

It was a revealing expression of the increasingly faction-riddled government’s fear of a wider movement developing in the working class. Such a movement is equally threatening to the Labor Party, which is seeking to regain office by reassuring big business that it will prove a more stable and reliable instrument than Abbott’s government for enforcing the corporate agenda.

While seeking to avert a broader revolt, the MUA and the other unions are trying to channel growing unrest and disaffection among workers back behind the election of yet another Labor government. Today the MUA has invited federal Labor shadow minister Brendan O’Connor to speak at Port Botany, posing as a friend of workers, before a planned return to work, just as they previously hosted Labor leader Bill Shorten on the picket. There were similar scenes in 1998.

Workers on the docks and everywhere have to draw the lessons of these experiences. For decades, every dispute has ended in betrayal. Countless thousands of jobs have been wiped out as the unions suppressed resistance. On every occasion, the unions have functioned as agencies of the employers and governments—whether Labor or Coalition.

It’s time for a new perspective—a strategy for winning, not losing, based on an offensive by the working class itself. That means breaking from the unions, forming rank-and-file committees to organise and develop the waterfront strike, and inviting workers from DP World and Asciano to participate. It means turning out to other layers of workers to join in, as well as Hutchison workers around the world, especially in Indonesia, where Hutchison plans job cuts in Jakarta’s port, to fight to defend their own jobs and conditions.

This is a fight not only against the union, but against the Abbott government, the Labor leaders and the entire political establishment. If workers are going to have secure jobs and decent living standards, they must challenge and replace the profit system itself. In other words, what is required is a socialist perspective—the fight for a workers’ government that will nationalise the ports, together with the banks and other basic industries, under democratic workers’ control—so that the powerful technological and economic resources developed by the working class itself are harnessed for the benefit of all, not the wealthy corporate elite.



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