Sacked Hutchison workers barred entry after Australian union sells out strike

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Under the terms of the Federal Court ruling that the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has used to shut down all strike action yesterday at the company's container terminals, the 97 workers sacked by Hutchison Ports last week have no guarantee of returning to work, even temporarily.

The weeklong strike action, in defiance of two return-to-work orders by the Fair Work Commission, erupted after Hutchison sacked almost half its workforce via late-night text and email messages at Brisbane and Sydney's Port Botany on August 6.

The MUA cynically claimed Thursday's court ruling was a "victory" and directed its members to report for work early Friday, insisting that the sacked workers had been "reinstated."

This is a patent lie. The court ruling specifies that Hutchison has the right to stop any retrenched worker from re-entering its terminals. Paragraph 11 of the ruling categorically states that Hutchison is "not obliged to provide the relevant employees with work if they are unwilling or unable to do so" and the "injunction does not create any significant practical change to the present relationship" between Hutchison and the sacked workers.

To cover up the MUA's betrayal, "honour guards" were organised to "cheer on" the first shift of strikers returning to work, accompanied by breathless reportage by the mainstream media of a supposed win for the sacked dockworkers. In Sydney, however, three workers were excluded from the terminal. In Brisbane, sacked workers have also not returned to work.

The MUA was so determined to shut down the strike, and head off any wider outbreak of industrial action, that it agreed to all the Federal Court's stipulations. This includes paying the wages of the sacked workers, and any future damages claims made by the multi-billion dollar global stevedoring company, if the court rules against the MUA when it reconvenes on September 1.

MUA assistant national secretary Warren Smith told the media that the court ruling "reflects a basic justice" and a "decision that everyone on the picket line" and "every member of the Australian public, who stands up for justice, wanted to hear."

What a fraud. The ruling gave the MUA precisely what it wanted: to shut down the strike and demobilise workers, while the union manoeuvres for a negotiated job-cutting deal.

Having imposed massive job cuts and the axing of hard-won conditions on the waterfront for the past three decades, the MUA is appealing to Hutchison to use the union's services to implement its requirements.

This was first spelled out two months ago, when Hutchison announced that it would eliminate half its workforce, claiming to be losing $40 million a year. The MUA called for collaboration on the retrenchments and other cost-cutting measures. Union resolutions calling for negotiations with the company were adopted at stopwork meetings in Brisbane on July 31 and Port Botany on August 3.

Last Thursday's Federal Court ruling was a highly political decision, made in the context of growing working-class support for the sacked workers. The picket lines outside Hutchison terminals threatened to become the focus for wider industrial action, deepening the political crisis facing the Abbott government.

Concerns were mounting in the government and big business that the stevedoring company bungled the mass sackings, fuelling working-class outrage. Workplace Relations Minister Eric Abetz, who immediately supported the sacking of the workers via late-night text and email messages, changed his

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position a few days later, saying Hutchison's "method of communicating with workers," had "not helped this already difficult situation."

A comment in yesterday's *Australian Financial Review* pointed to the anxiety in ruling circles. The article denounced the "stupidity" of Hutchison Ports, declaring that "although we don't often find ourselves in agreement" with the MUA, the sacking of workers by text message "is utterly unacceptable."

In other words, the business newspaper indicated that the safest and most effective means of axing jobs and conditions is by enlisting the cooperation of the unions.

By securing the court ruling, the MUA followed a script developed to shut down the Patrick Stevedores dispute in 1998, which erupted over the mass dismissal of waterside workers.

In line with a High Court ruling at that time, which the MUA also claimed was a "victory," the union accepted the destruction of over 600 jobs, half the Patrick workforce, and the axing of conditions. This established a benchmark throughout the waterfront and laid the basis for attacks that have been systematically deepened for the past 17 years.

If the MUA retains its stranglehold on Hutchison workers, the outcome of the struggle at Port Botany and Brisbane will be a foregone conclusion. In its talks with the company, the union will pinpoint jobs and conditions to eliminate, then tell workers that the sacrifices are necessary to retain some of positions by salvaging the company's bottom line.

The MUA and the rest of the trade union bureaucracy have employed this argument time and time again on the waterfront, transport and throughout manufacturing industry.

While Hutchison workers have demonstrated that they are prepared fight to defend their jobs, they remain trapped in the political straitjacket of the unions. In shutting down dispute after dispute, these thoroughly corporatised organisations have repeatedly served big business and Liberal and Labor governments alike, and the entire profit system.

To halt these defeats, workers need genuine organisations of struggle and a new political strategy. This means breaking from the unions, establishing rank-and-file committees that fight to mobilise the entire working class, including the Asciano-Patrick and DP World workers, who face another round of union-negotiated job cuts and attacks on conditions.

To defend jobs, win decent living standards and gain a future for all workers and their families, there must be a political struggle against the capitalist profit system, and the unions and Labor Party that enforce it. This means fighting for a workers' government, based on a socialist program. The banks and major industries, including the ports, must be nationalised under democratic workers' control.

This is the program advocated by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge Hutchison and other waterfront to contact us to discuss this program and how to carry forward the fight for it.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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