

Australia: Union officials force SEP supporters off Sydney dock picket

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Yesterday, just as the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) was preparing to send dockworkers back to work at the Hutchison terminals in Sydney and Brisbane, ending a week-long struggle against sackings, union representatives physically threatened Socialist Equality Party supporters, forcing them to leave Sydney's Port Botany picket.

Led by Paul McAleer, the MUA's Sydney branch secretary, union officials and delegates also seized SEP leaflets that published Thursday's *World Socialist Web Site* article explaining and warning workers of the betrayal being conducted by the union.

Unable to answer the content of the SEP leaflets—precisely because they told the truth about the sellout underway—the MUA and its allies resorted to thuggery and intimidation, accompanied by outright slanders.

Following Thursday night's announcement by MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin of a return to work, about 20 workers were told to be available for work at Port Botany at 6 a.m. yesterday. But by 10:30 a.m., after the shift was apparently cancelled, most workers had left the picket.

Throughout the morning, SEP supporters held discussions with Hutchison workers, warning that the MUA was betraying the struggle, just as it sold out the 1998 waterfront dispute, and explaining the need for workers to form rank-and-file committees, totally independent of the trade unions.

Initially, two Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) officials approached SEP supporters, called them “scum,” told them to “f*ck off” and burnt a copy of the leaflet.

SEP supporters left the picket and returned at 11:15 a.m. McAleer immediately accosted them, hysterically shouting that they were “against democracy” and

against “workers’ decisions.”

About 20 CFMEU officials and delegates, who had been bussed in, surrounded two young SEP supporters and snatched their leaflets and a notebook out of their hands. McAleer continued shouting profanities, such as: “You’re f*cking full of sh*t... What the f*ck have you done for the working class?”

The SEP supporters insisted on their democratic right to fight for a socialist perspective among workers. McAleer responded: “You don’t have no f*cking democratic rights.”

CFMEU delegates began making threats, telling one SEP supporter: “You better leave now with your life.” Another declared that the SEP supporters would be thrown “into the river” if they did not leave.

One delegate urged two police officers, who were watching the incident, to arrest the SEP supporters, yelling: “These are agitators, what are you going to do about it?”

Although SEP supporters had been at the Port Botany picket every day since the dispute began on Friday, August 7, it was only yesterday that McAleer mobilised CFMEU delegates to evict them.

The immediate reason for McAleer's actions was that the union had organised a “walk in” of workers back to work at 2 p.m., but three sacked workers were barred from entry. The MUA was attempting to get workers to return to work, knowing that, as a result of the union's court injunction, the sacked workers would remain excluded from the premises.

The MUA's anti-democratic and thuggish actions reveal a deep concern within the union bureaucracy of a rebellion developing in the working class against the betrayals that have been carried out by the unions for decades.

Far from doing “nothing for the working class,” as

McAleer claims, the SEP and WSWs alone are fighting for a perspective for the working class to take forward the struggle against job cuts and the destruction of working conditions.

If the analysis and strategy advanced by the SEP meant “nothing” for dockworkers, why bother threatening violence to try to stop the leaflets getting into their hands?

Since the strike began, the WSWs has published articles daily, including interviews with workers on the picket, and consistently warned that far from mounting a struggle in defence of jobs, the MUA is calling for “automation by negotiation,” which means collaborating with management to carry out redundancies.

In the leaflet seized by union representatives, the WSWs specifically drew attention to the fact that the MUA is seeking to do the same as it did in the 1998 Patricks dispute. Then too, the union used a court ruling to call off the six-week strike and, once workers were demobilised, negotiated the destruction of 650 jobs, or almost half the workforce, paving the way for an endless assault on dockworkers’ jobs and conditions over the past 17 years.

We call on all workers to oppose the cowardly attack on the SEP supporters. This violence is not only aimed at the SEP. It also seeks to intimidate any criticism of the MUA by dockworkers themselves. The unions cannot tolerate a democratic and open discussion of their record because they are selling out the workers at Hutchison, just as they have done in every dispute over the past three decades.

Yesterday’s events further underscore the need for workers to take a stand against the endless destruction of jobs and conditions by the corporate elite, which is aided and abetted by the trade unions and the Labor Party. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, with the aim of mobilising dockworkers, and other sections of the working class, in Australia and internationally, on the basis of the fight for a socialist program.



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