Australian wharfies voice concerns about MUA sellout of Hutchison strike

Our reporters
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Last Friday, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) betrayed a seven-day strike by Hutchison Ports workers in Sydney and Brisbane against 97 sackings—half the global company's Australian workforce.

In a move that directly mirrored its betrayal of the 1998 Australian waterfront dispute, the MUA shut down the struggle, sending the Hutchison strikers back to work, after obtaining a Federal Court ruling that left the 97 workers barred by the company from returning to work.

Hutchison's 224-strong workforce had walked out on August 7, after the company sacked the employees via late-night text messages and emails. The strike defied two return-to-work orders from the federal government's Fair Work Commission and won growing support from other workers, including wharfies from other stevedoring companies.

The capitalist court ordered Hutchison to pay the sacked workers their basic wage rates for two weeks, until the full hearing of the union's case. However, the judge insisted that the company was not required to allocate the sacked workers any shifts or allow them back inside its container terminals.

The judge's ruling gave the MUA exactly what it sought: a means of demobilising the dockworkers while it pursues negotiations with Hutchison over how to impose the job cuts and other cost-cutting that the company is demanding.

In 1998, the MUA carried out a similar political manoeuvre, using a High Court ruling to halt a six-week struggle against mass sackings by Patrick, and avert what had become a major crisis for the Howard Coalition government.

The court decision paved the way for negotiations with Patrick that led to the elimination of the jobs of half its workers, and set in motion the ongoing destruction of jobs and conditions on Australia's docks that halved the employers' labour costs over the ensuing 17 years.

As the full ramifications of the latest MUA betrayal became clear, waterside workers spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, criticising the sellout and voicing concerns about the fate of the sacked Hutchison workers.

The MUA directed the Hutchison strikers to report for work early Friday, falsely claiming that the sacked wharfies had been "reinstated." The union was so anxious to prevent the dispute from spreading that it even agreed to pay the sacked workers' wages if the court finds against the MUA when it reconvenes on September 1.

To cover up this betrayal, the union hailed the court injunction as a "victory" and mobilised trade union officials to rallies at Port Botany and Brisbane on August 14 to promote this lie and "cheer on" the returning workers.

At the same time, MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer and other union officials at Port Botany physically threatened Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters who distributed *World Socialist Web Site* leaflets on Friday explaining the union's sellout of the strike (see: "Union officials force SEP supporters off Sydney dock picket").

The next day, this intimidation escalated to an explicit death threat. Three SEP supporters handing out a further WSWS article that detailed the union betrayal were confronted at Port Botany by someone who identified himself as a retired MUA member from Adelaide.

He yelled: "We threw you guys off yesterday because of your bullshit agitation … Get going now or I'll knock your f***ing block off… Get out now or you'll get a

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Glock pistol to your head and next time we will throw you in the river."

The MUA and its backers have resorted to thuggery because they cannot answer the WSWS articles. That is because the articles tell the truth—the union is seeking to carry out a betrayal, just like it did in 1998.

Above all, the union bureaucrats fear that the SEP's fight against the sellout is winning a hearing among workers. The same violent methods will be used to try to silence and intimidate Hutchison workers and other waterside workers opposed to the union's betrayal.

A veteran waterside maintenance worker from Patricks, currently employed by DP World, told the WSWS that the situation was "looking bad" for Hutchison workers. Wharfies at DP World, he said, were "not happy" about the outcome.

"There's now supposed to be a picket line of the sacked workers, but what are they supposed to do? It's all show. The outcome will not be good for anyone and it reminds me of the Patricks fight in 1998.

"The Patricks dispute was a huge sellout. [John] Coombs [MUA national secretary] did a deal with the company and we were told we had won. They could have taken down the government. They had it by the throat and they let it go. I couldn't believe it.

"Patrick maintenance jobs were kept, but the return-to-work conditions were nothing like what they previously had. Most of the waterfront is now casual and these conditions are spreading throughout all industries.

"The really rich in this country made a lot of money out of that dispute. Patricks' shares were worth about $6 before the strike and then during the strike they shot up to about $22."

Referring to the union's role in enforcing the deteriorating working conditions, the DP World worker said. "We have a new 'productivity commission' and it's the union. We've set new benchmarks and these are used in the industry. There have been crisis meetings with us and we've been told we have to pick up the pace. We were told that automation was good for the workers, but all it has done is cut jobs and make us work harder."

Referring to the latest court ruling, a Hutchison worker told the WSWS: "We got nothing. It's a sugar-coated victory. If they [the MUA] lose in the Federal Court, they'll be up for damages and that means our dues will probably go up… We're losing all the conditions we had since '98 and they want to talk about victory?"

A sacked Hutchison worker commented that the union had said they would be reinstated and they should report for work. "I don't know what's going on," he explained. "The company has sent me an email saying that the redundancies had been temporarily rescinded, but we've heard nothing else.

"Even if the court says we should be reinstated, it will be a long drawn-out fight. I doubt that I'm ever going to get back into Hutchisons. Apart from two weeks' pay before the next court hearing, the decision doesn't change anything for me.

"I suppose if the union can save 20 out of 50 jobs at Port Botany, that's a win, but I'm not sure what kind of victory that would be. Even if that happened, the company would have to get back the work they've sub-contracted to other stevedores. I've heard through the grapevine that the contracts are for three months, so what are we supposed to do? It seems like we're stuffed whatever happens. I just feel that we've lost the battle and it's all over.

"The outcome as far as I can see is that I'm going to put my house up for sale and try and find another job. The only jobs that I see out there only pay $20–$22 an hour, which is not enough to pay the mortgage and keep my family going."

Asked about the SEP's call for the establishment of rank-and-file committees and a fight for a socialist program, the sacked worker commented: "This is all new ground for me. What I do know is that we're heading into some really tough times. There's a downturn in China and I was reading the *Financial Review* today and they're predicting a recession in Australia."

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