

Australia: Hutchison Ports dispute at the crossroads

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
29 August 2015

The Hutchison Ports dispute has reached a crucial turning point. If left in the hands of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), the outcome is a foregone conclusion. Not only will jobs be lost at Hutchison, but the defeat will be used to set a new benchmark for driving up productivity and profits at the expense of workers across the waterfront and workplaces throughout the country.

Hutchison workers in Sydney and Brisbane took united strike action on August 7 after the company summarily sacked 97 out of its Australian workforce of 224. They maintained pickets for a week, defying two return-to-work orders by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) tribunal and winning the sympathy of workers around the country.

Under conditions where a wave of job destruction has been underway, the strike provoked concerns in ruling circles, including the Abbott government and Labor opposition, that it would become the focal point for a wider struggle by the working class to defend jobs. The MUA stepped in to end the industrial action, obtaining a federal court injunction on August 13 to delay the sackings while it negotiated with the company.

The union has effectively split the Hutchison workforce, as the sacked workers, while formally “reinstated” on minimum base rates, have not been rostered and remain out the gate. Meanwhile closed-door talks in the FWC between the MUA and the company are being dragged out, leaving workers demobilised and completely in the dark about their future. According to the *Australian*, the federal court hearing to consider the injunction is to be adjourned and negotiations will continue next week over a new workplace agreement to be signed in mid-October.

Far from being neutral arbiters, the courts are part of the conspiracy against the working class. The unions accept court rulings as a fait accompli, and then exploit the threat of court penalties to block industrial action. This has been their modus operandi stretching back to their “Accords” with the Hawke/Keating Labor governments and big business between 1983 and 1996, and continuing under successive Liberal and Labor governments ever since.

Nowhere have the consequences of the collaboration of unions, government and big business been more devastating for the working class than on the docks. Between 1987 and 1991,

under the Hawke Labor government’s Waterfront Industry Reform Agreement with the unions, 4,500 jobs were destroyed, about half the full-time workforce, and productivity driven to the levels of exploitation experienced by workers in Singapore, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

The last major confrontation on the waterfront was the six-week strike in 1998, triggered by the mass retrenchments imposed by Patrick Stevedores. The MUA was outraged, not by the sackings, but because the company and the Howard Coalition government had elbowed it out of the restructuring process. As the dispute dragged on, and concerns grew over ever-wider industrial action and public support, the MUA exploited a federal court ruling to call off the strike, and save the day for the Howard government. Once Patrick agreed to talks, the union accepted virtually all its demands, including the elimination of half the workforce.

In 1998 the MUA loudly proclaimed the federal court decision a “victory,” and it is doing the same again. In reality, neither was anything of the sort. The only jobs that MUA officials have been concerned about are their own. Their “victory” consists in being back in negotiations—and thus remaining a key player in arranging the final sell-out.

The MUA has not even bothered to hide its intentions, signalling in advance that it will accept job cuts. On August 13, national secretary Paddy Crumlin declared: “We’ll negotiate on the basis that people go. If there’s no contracts, they go.” Two weeks later, on August 27, Crumlin took part in the National Reform Summit convened by Murdoch’s *Australian* and Fairfax’s *Australian Financial Review*—neither known as friends of waterfront workers—to offer his advice to business leaders and government on how to drive up productivity on the docks.

At the same time, the MUA has ruled out strike action by waterfront workers at Asciano (formerly Patrick) and DP World—let alone any call for broader industrial support—on the grounds it would be illegal. Instead, as in the case of the 1998 strike, the union has set up “community assemblies” whose only purpose is to demoralise and disperse the Hutchison workers and keep them subordinated to the union’s perspective of manoeuvring in the courts.

To maintain its political fraud, the MUA has been aided by

appearances from a string of politicians, including Labor leader Bill Shorten and Greens senator Lee Rhiannon, as well as officials from other unions. Even more insidious has been the role played by the various pseudo-left groupings such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, which virulently defend the unions as the only legitimate representatives of the working class. The “community assemblies” and associated stunts are not designed to defend jobs, but are intended to wear down workers as the MUA stitches up a deal with Hutchison behind their backs.

The MUA has directed its political venom, not against Hutchison or the government, but against the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the only party to warn workers about the union betrayal underway, to call for a break from the MUA and to propose the development of an independent political and industrial struggle, based on a socialist perspective. On August 14 and 15, as it was herding Hutchison wharfies back to work, the MUA, acting in cahoots with the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, roughly jostled SEP members distributing leaflets on the waterfront, and then made violent death threats against them. These threats were aimed not only against the SEP, but at intimidating and silencing any criticism by Hutchison workers of the union and its actions. True to form, not one of the MUA’s backers in the Labor Party, the Greens or the pseudo-left organisations has uttered a word of protest.

The hostility of the MUA to the SEP flows from our opposition to its nationalist program of class collaboration, carried out in conjunction with the entire Labor and union apparatus, under which it has carried out a never-ending assault on jobs and working conditions in the name of ensuring the “international competitiveness” of Australian capitalism. The end product is on display in the car industry, where the unions have justified one round of restructuring after another in the name of “defending jobs.” Now Ford, GMH and Toyota are in the process of winding down all production in Australia, with the full complicity of the unions, on the grounds that production is not “competitive.”

The sharpest expression of the consequences for the working class of the accelerating breakdown of global capitalism, which began in 2008, is in Greece where the pseudo-left Syriza government is imposing the diktats of European and international finance capital for the wholesale destruction of jobs, pensions and social rights. In the US, thousands of steelworkers are facing sackings and demands for cost-cutting, while the major auto companies and auto unions are conspiring to further slash working conditions in upcoming new contracts.

In Australia, the collapse of the mining boom has ended the myth that Australian capitalism is somehow immune from the global crisis. The sackings at Hutchison are part of an avalanche of job destruction. Just in the past week, the unions have rushed into talks with BlueScope Steel to slash at least 500 more jobs at the Port Kembla steelworks in order to

achieve cost savings of \$200 million.

The SEP urges Hutchison and all waterfront workers to seriously consider the implications of the broader economic and political situation facing the working class. The essential first step in defending jobs is a complete break with the MUA, its manoeuvres in the courts, and its back-room negotiations with the company. Workers need to establish their own rank-and-file committees, led by trusted and democratically-elected representatives, to resume strike action and a genuine picket. This will require the mobilisation of other workers across the waterfront, in the steel, car and other industries, in Australia and internationally, for a joint offensive to defend jobs, conditions and living standards.

Such a struggle can only be developed if it is guided by a different political perspective. The only means for fighting the predatory activities of huge international corporations like Hutchison is to unify workers across national boundaries. The only purpose of the MUA’s reactionary “Aussie jobs for Aussie workers” campaign is to divide Australian workers from their class brothers and sisters around the world who are facing the same onslaught.

Workers must reject the nationalist and corporatist program of Labor and the unions, which serves the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite while driving the working class into a race to the bottom in the dog-eat-dog fight for “international competitiveness.”

The working class is not responsible for the crisis of global capitalism and should refuse to pay for it. If the present social order, based on private profit, cannot provide for the basic needs of working people everywhere, it should be abolished and society completely reorganised on the basis of a socialist perspective, in the interests of the majority, not the obscene lifestyles of the wealthy few. To carry this out, the working class must take power into its hands through the establishment of a workers’ government—a government of, for and by the workers.

The docks, along with the banks and major corporations, must be taken out of the hands of the private owners, finance houses and hedge funds, and placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

This is the revolutionary perspective of socialist internationalism, fought for by the SEP, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. We urge Hutchison workers to contact us and begin a discussion of these crucial issues contained in the current struggle and for the future of the working class as a whole.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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