

Maritime Union of Australia thanks pseudo-lefts for “unity” as it foreshadows acceptance of port sackings

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At a “community rally” in Sydney last night, officials of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) announced that they were engaged in discussions with Hutchison management over the sacking of workers, including forced redundancies, and the possible “mothballing,” or closure, of the company’s port operation altogether.

The rally was called after the NSW Port Authority issued a notice for the eviction of the small “community assembly” the union has maintained outside Hutchison since the company sacked 97 workers in Sydney and Brisbane on August 6. The Authority rescinded the eviction notice shortly after, and informed the MUA it could continue its assembly, which has had no impact on port operations, indefinitely.

Around 150 people attended the rally, including a small number of port workers from Hutchison and the other major stevedoring companies, Asciano (formerly Patrick) and DP World. Over the past month, the MUA has worked hand in hand with the company to prevent the development of an independent struggle by Hutchison and other port workers against the sackings. On August 14, the union ended strike action after the federal court handed down an injunction. The MUA responded by ordering a return to work despite the company refusing to roster the sacked workers and leaving them outside the gates.

Since then, the MUA has been holding talks with Hutchison over the company’s demands for cost-cutting and job destruction. Last Friday, the union signed a “memorandum of understanding” with the company and agreed to drop its “unfair dismissal” case in the federal courts. The union then entered into ongoing closed-door negotiations with Hutchison in the Fair Work Commission, which began on Monday. Mark Jack, acting CEO of Hutchison Ports Australia (HPA), described the

talks as “useful and constructive.”

At the rally last night, Paul McAleer, the MUA’s Sydney branch secretary, admitted that Hutchison’s parent company was considering “mothballing,” or closing down its Australian operations for 18 months to two years.

In an expression of the extent to which the union functions as an open agent of the company, McAleer reported that the MUA was also in talks with ship-owners, appealing for them to continue using Hutchison’s port.

McAleer outlined the union’s acceptance of sackings, if the “ships don’t return” to Hutchison, declaring: “If there are going to be redundancies they should be voluntary, if there are forced redundancies... they should only be done on the basis of a fair selection criteria and at the end of the day, the right of return... That at the end of the day, and the ships go, and there are redundancies, that we want those jobs back when they return...”

In other words, the union will work with the company to enforce job cuts, and an “orderly closure” while Hutchison shuts down some or all of its port operations. Such a move would be aimed at slashing the workforce, and proceeding with further “efficiencies” on the basis of automation, or the closure of Hutchison’s Australian operations altogether.

McAleer’s comments dovetailed with an article by the MUA’s national secretary, Paddy Crumlin, in Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper today. Crumlin declared that the “company’s predicament is not all of its own making,” and that they were “victims of the dysfunction of Australia’s maritime sector.” He claimed that Hutchison’s “predicament” was because the port market is not large enough to sustain three Australian operators, and the major shipping lines engage in “anti-competitive” practices.

Significantly, Crumlin touted the doubling of productivity, and halving of costs in the industry, between 1998 and 2013. These measures were carried out by the major stevedoring companies, on the basis of the MUA's betrayal of the 1998 Patrick's dispute, when the union struck a deal with the company to end industrial action. Some 700 jobs were eliminated as a result. Crumlin concluded by calling on state and federal governments to invest in infrastructure programs which would further boost the productivity of the ports.

His comments are a signal that the MUA is preparing to justify working with the company to shut-down its operations entirely.

McAleer, well aware that this agenda is provoking growing opposition among Hutchison and other port workers, declared that "true strength lies in unity." A member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, he acknowledged the entire political line-up that has come together to smother the port workers, and prevent them from taking up a political struggle against the sackings, and all those responsible, including the union, the Abbott government, and the Labor Party opposition.

McAleer declared: "It is so encouraging not only to see the major political parties being here, the ALP and the Greens, but also the Socialist Alliance, Solidarity, Socialist Alternative, the Communist Party of Australia." He stated that this line-up demonstrated that "the left movement has come together recognising there is more that unites us than divides us and that we are only going to beat the ruling class by standing side by side and fighting."

The pseudo-left organisations named by McAleer have functioned as the key political adjuncts of the union throughout the dispute. They have hailed each stage in the MUA's preparations for yet another betrayal, as a "victory," including the ending of strike action on August 14, and the union's entrance into negotiations with the company.

These organisations have also manned the "community assemblies" in Sydney and Brisbane, which have been attended by numerous Labor and Green politicians, who are directly responsible for the elimination of jobs, and the gutting of social spending. Above all, the pseudo-lefts have insisted that workers must remain within the framework of the courts, negotiations, and the existing political set-up—the mechanisms the unions have used, over the past three decades, to collaborate in the slashing of tens of thousands of jobs, and the destruction of wages and conditions.

McAleer's comments were specifically directed against the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the only organisation that has warned Hutchison workers of the betrayal being prepared by the union, and fought for the independent political mobilisation of dock workers against the union and the sackings, on the basis of a socialist and international perspective.

On August 14, when the union was ending strike action, McAleer led an attack against SEP members, carried out by officials and delegates of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CMFEU). The SEP members had their leaflets snatched, were jostled, and subjected to death threats by the group for warning that the union was preparing to betray the port workers, and negotiate away their jobs.

Last night, after the rally, SEP members were again menaced and told to "f--k off" by two CFMEU members. Significantly, it was when the SEP members began a discussion with two Hutchison workers, one of whom has already been sacked, that the CFMEU representatives made their move. Their role at the "community assembly" was to intimidate those workers who are becoming increasingly hostile to the MUA's manoeuvres, and receptive to a genuine alternative.

The MUA's explicit support for sackings underscores the necessity for Hutchison workers to take up a new political perspective. This means a break with the unions, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees aimed at uniting workers from Hutchison's, Asciano, and DP World, along with other sections of workers, in a common struggle against the assault on jobs, wages, and conditions being overseen by the Abbott Coalition government, the Labor opposition and the entire political establishment.

Such organisations must be grounded on the fight for a workers government and socialist policies, which would place the ports and other major industries under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, and guarantee the right to a decent, well-paid job for all.



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