

Australian waterside workers “in the dark” as union negotiates job cuts with Hutchison

Richard Phillips
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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is maintaining its closed-door negotiations over redundancies and cost-cutting with Hutchison Ports. The company dismissed 97 wharfies or half its Australian workforce on August 6. Workers immediately walked out in protest over the sackings in Sydney and Brisbane and remained on strike for a week in defiance of two Fair Work Commission orders.

The MUA, which had appealed for the company to use the union to “negotiate” the job cuts prior to the sackings, used a federal court injunction on August 13 to shut down all action the next day after the company agreed to pay the sacked workers’ wages for two more weeks. On August 28, the union signed a “memorandum of understanding” with Hutchison and entered high-level talks last week in the Fair Work Commission, after the company agreed to extend wage payments to the sacked workers until October 15.

The union insists that the federal court ruling and the subsequent “memorandum of understanding” have “protected” the waterside workers’ jobs. This is a patent lie. The dismissed waterfront workers are not rostered on and four weeks since they were originally sacked, they remain barred entry to the company’s terminals.

Hutchison wharfies have been told by MUA officials that they should participate in “community assembly” protests mainly staffed by union bureaucrats and their close supporters, backed by various pseudo-left organisations. These protests are being used to provide a platform for Labor and Green politicians, who feign concern over the sackings, and as a political smokescreen for the MUA as it deepens its cost-cutting collaboration with the company.

The MUA talks are not just over the sacking of the 97 workers. Last Thursday MUA officials told a rally outside Hutchison’s Port Botany terminal that the union was discussing a possible two-year closure of the company’s stevedoring operations in Australia. The company claims that it is “incurring substantial losses in Australia,” including \$87 million during the 2014 calendar year.

The MUA-Hutchison negotiations have one aim—to make the company more competitive than its local rivals, Asciano

and DP World. If the cost-cutting proposals being presented by the union do not achieve this outcome—the company will “mothball” or completely axe its facilities, with the union offering its services for an orderly closure.

Hutchison workers and thousands of rank-and-file members of the MUA throughout the country have been provided with no real details about the union’s closed-door talks.

As one sacked Hutchison worker from Port Botany explained to the WSWS: “We don’t know what’s going on. We’re just waiting, waiting and waiting.”

He said that some of the Hutchison workers, who had been directed back to work by the union, had been told that they would be presented with a new enterprise agreement within six weeks. “This is nonsense,” he said. “How’s an enterprise agreement going to happen in six weeks. It has never happened in any other industry, let alone the waterfront. It usually takes eight to twelve months at the earliest. Maybe the company is talking about individual contracts.”

Asked to comment on the MUA decision to end all strike action and negotiate the job cuts, he said: “I don’t want to speak too much on what the union is doing. At times I have to stop thinking about it because this dispute is doing my head in. Maybe there’ll be some good news after the talks in the Fair Work Commission.

“The first question though is who can you trust anymore? The unions obviously want to survive, and I think they have the right to survive, but are they going accept our jobs being destroyed? I hope not and I wouldn’t agree with that.

“The unions should be protecting every job and every condition that’s been fought for and won on the waterfront. This is what’s needed, and not just for us, but for the next generation. If we don’t defend these things the working class are done for.

“We’re facing a situation where China is one of the biggest manufacturers in the world but now it’s facing a down turn, and if it can’t make a go of it, then the economy in Australia is stuffed. Australia has a tiny economy—it’s

like a small boat in the ocean facing a tidal wave but with no steering and no engines... The working class has to do what it can to survive but it's going to be tough battle.

"There are no jobs out there. I've made dozens of job applications and most of the time you don't even get the courtesy of a reply. If I don't get some positive work soon we won't be able to pay the mortgage and we'll have to sell the house.

"Everything I've worked for since I left school in the early 1980s will have gone down the gurgler. It only took one person's decision to screw up everything for us. This is not just about me though, every worker is vulnerable. All sorts of people control our destinies—everybody except us," he said.

A waterside worker from DP World in Port Botany told the WSWS that he had no information about the union talks on the Hutchison sackings.

"There is the protest picket outside the terminal, and I've been there, but apart from that we don't really know what's going on. The Hutchison sackings do show that these companies can get rid of you anytime they want.

"We've been told that automation won't be introduced at DP World for the life our latest enterprise agreement [EBA] but the people who write these agreements can more or less do what they want anytime.

"As soon as the union signed the EBA with Patrick, the company introduced automation and began retrenching people. Some people have been reemployed until they iron out all the problems with automation, but only as casuals."

Commenting on the MUA negotiations with Hutchison, he said. "I don't know why the MUA decided to tell half the Hutchison workers to go back into the terminal. I don't know much about the politics of all these things but the unions have become a toothless tigers.

"There are all these laws preventing us from going on strike but there is supposed to be a right to strike. Isn't it something close to a human right—even the Pope once said something like that. For the Labor government to have brought in the Fair Work laws, which they did, is an indication that they have lost any moral compass. Both sides of politics—Liberal and Labor—pander to the corporate multinationals these days.

"The media are just propaganda mouth-pieces for the corporations—the *Daily Telegraph* [the Murdoch-owned Sydney tabloid] is the worst—but this includes the ABC. Some people say the ABC is left-leaning but I don't see this at all. It has to toe the government line or it comes under attack. The media promotes an official line that it's cool to be politically ignorant.

"Newspapers like the *Telegraph* always promote individualism and backwardness. They constantly have

sensationalist headlines saying that wharfies get it easy and don't have to work hard and are all bludgers. It's all about divide and conquer in the workplace and everywhere else and the unions have done nothing to fight all this. I'm very disillusioned with the situation."

Speaking about conditions at DP World, he said: "Our place runs on fear now—fear of losing your job. I've got to say that I'm pretty disenchanted with the situation. There's all sorts of cronyism in the workplace, and the unions have accepted this, and unless you're in the clique you're squeezed out. It seems like I'm getting the last puff of air from the benefits won by the previous generations," he said.

The sacking of Hutchison workers is part of an intensifying employer and government assault in the entire working class.

The first step in the struggle to defeat the joint MUA-Hutchison attack involves making a political break from the unions and entire Labor Party apparatus and for the establishment of genuine rank-and-file committees to resume the strike, establish real picket lines and mobilise waterside workers in Sydney, Brisbane and across Australia, as well as internationally.

In order to defeat the union-big business assault, workers need to turn to a new perspective and one based on a socialist perspective that challenges the capitalist profit system, the source of the unrelenting assault on wharfies and the entire working class.

The defence of jobs, wages and hard-won working conditions is only possible as part of the struggle for a workers' government, which places the banks and major industries, including the ports, steel and mining, under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, with production organised, not for private profit, but to according to the needs of the majority. This is the political program advocated by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge Hutchison and other waterfronts workers to contact us to discuss this perspective and how to fight for it.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)