

Australian maritime union moves to sell out Hutchison dispute

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is attempting to call off the two-month-old dispute at Hutchison Ports over the sacking of almost half the company's workforce in Sydney and Brisbane by text messages on August 6.

Unless waterside workers reject the agreement that the MUA has struck with Hutchison, the result will be a defeat not just on the docks but one that will pave the way for an acceleration of the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions taking place throughout the working class.

Under the MUA-Hutchison deal, negotiated behind closed doors since August, the 97 retrenched workers will be reinstated, but only on the basis of all 224 Hutchison workers sharing "reduced hours." Essentially, this means working for half pay, or even less, depending on what hours the company offers.

So-called voluntary redundancies will then be offered to all workers. In other words, the MUA will help the company use the loss of pay and conditions to pressure enough workers to take redundancy packages to deliver the job-shedding that Hutchison originally demanded.

There will also be serious cuts to working conditions, either via a renegotiated enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) or a "deed" suspending terms of the EBA. Retrenched workers will be offered a "right of return" to Hutchison for a period, but only if the company decides to hire workers, and only on the reduced pay and conditions.

The MUA also plans to drop its Federal Court action against the company's sackings, which had set a deadline of October 14, after which the retrenched workers would no longer be paid even the minimal wages ordered by the court until a settlement was reached.

This sellout, which was outlined to a small meeting of Hutchison workers at Sydney's Port Botany last Saturday, underscores the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* from the outset.

As the Socialist Equality Party reiterated in a statement on August 29: "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."

The union is blatantly urging workers to submit to the halving of their pay and tearing up of conditions in order to meet the profit requirements of Hutchison Ports, a global stevedoring giant. At the same time, it is exploiting these sub-standards to drive workers out the gate, adding to the barrage of job losses currently being inflicted on workers throughout the auto plants, the steel industry, engineering factories, privatised electricity utilities and the mines.

This betrayal flows directly from the MUA's treachery throughout the dispute.

Hutchison workers in Sydney and Brisbane initially took united strike action on August 7. They maintained pickets for a week, defying two return-to-work orders by the federal government's Fair Work Commission (FWC) tribunal and gaining the sympathy of workers around the country.

The strike caused concerns in the corporate elite, and its servants in the Liberal-National government and Labor opposition, that it could trigger a broader working class struggle to defend jobs and conditions. The MUA quickly halted the industrial action, securing a Federal Court injunction on August 13 to delay the sackings while it negotiated with the company.

By doing so, the union effectively split the Hutchison workforce. The sacked workers, while formally "reinstated" on impossibly low base pay rates, remained locked out of the company's terminals. Talks between the MUA and the company were dragged out for eight weeks, leaving workers in the dark and demobilised. Token protest "community assemblies" at the gates, never intended to impede Hutchison operations, inevitably dwindled away.

MUA officials told Saturday's Port Botany meeting that the union's proposed settlement with Hutchison was an "immense victory" achieved by the "magnificent" united stand taken by the workers. Reportedly, the MUA hopes to finalise all the terms of the deal by tomorrow and push workers to vote for it.

Far from a “victory,” the pact with Hutchison sets a precedent for pay and job cutting akin to the halving of pay for new hires in the US auto plants and imposition of a two-tier wage system by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and the Obama administration in 2009.

Hutchison workers should study and take a lead from the stand taken by tens of thousands of Fiat-Chrysler auto workers across the US by overwhelmingly rejecting the latest contract proposed by the UAW, which would have maintained the two-tier wages regime and the destruction of other hard-won conditions imposed since the 2008-09 global financial crisis.

This defiant “no” vote has posed the necessity for workers in America and internationally to engage in new independent forms of struggle, in direct opposition to the trade unions, which have been transformed over the past three decades into apparatuses that police the requirements of the financial elite.

In Australia, as in the US and elsewhere, the unions, including the MUA, have worked to suppress all expressions of opposition to the dictates of the corporations and the governments.

That was demonstrated in no uncertain terms by the last “great victory” claimed by the MUA in the previous major confrontation on the waterfront—the six-week strike in 1998, triggered by mass retrenchments by Patrick Stevedores. As the dispute dragged on, and fears grew in ruling circles over wider public support, the MUA utilised a High Court ruling to call off the strike, and save the day for the Howard Liberal-National government.

Once Patrick agreed to talks, the union accepted virtually all its demands, including a near-halving of the permanent workforce through “voluntary redundancies,” the casualisation and contracting out of jobs, smaller work crews, longer regular hours and company control over rostering. The only “victory” was for the MUA bureaucracy, which retained its role as the industrial police force on the waterfront.

It is no accident that during the current dispute, the MUA has threatened physical violence against members and supporters of the SEP, the only party to warn workers about the union betrayal underway, and to call for a break from the MUA. These threats were aimed not only against the SEP, but at silencing any criticism by Hutchison workers of the union and its actions.

Reflecting on these experiences, a Port Botany Hutchison worker told the WSWS he opposed the MUA’s proposal. “We all want to see every worker back, but they won’t be able to survive on the hours of work that the union is putting forward,” he said. “I can’t really survive now on 30 hours a week, flat rate. Why would workers want to come back into

Hutchison to work maybe 15 to 24 hours a week?”

“The MUA is calling this a victory, but it’s a fake victory, like the one they claimed at Patrick back in 1998. This is 100 percent what you [the SEP] warned about from the start.

“The MUA didn’t like being criticised. That’s why they were violent toward you, but that only made them look weaker ... They looked childish and thuggish. They want to keep workers in the dark, but now I’m growing up ...

“No one can see this deal working. If we have a vote, I don’t think it will get over the line. Over the past eight weeks, the union has created a divide between those who are working and those who are not. The majority will not vote for half pay. I’m really struggling to pay my mortgage payments now. I’m only taking home about \$900 a week, compared to an average of about \$1,200 to \$1,300 before.”

A sacked Hutchison worker commented: “I wouldn’t call this a victory. We won’t survive on reduced hours. I could only come back on full hours. We have lost our livelihoods. This is ridiculous ... The company will get what it wanted eight weeks ago ...

“The union is helping out the company more than it is helping us. The EBA should not be changed either. I can’t see anyone putting up their hands for that. Everyone will go down the gurgler if this is accepted ...

“I’ve worked in a lot of places and it’s always the same. We have been losing conditions for years. No union is different. They always say they are standing firm, then they say they can’t get anything better for us.”

Workers should reject the MUA-Hutchison agreement and make a complete break with the MUA. Workers need to establish their own elected rank-and-file committees to resume strike action and a genuine picket. This will require a turn to mobilise other workers across the waterfront, in the steel, car, mining and other industries, in Australia and internationally, for a joint offensive to defend jobs, conditions and living standards.

To develop and sustain this struggle, workers need a new perspective, a socialist one, that challenges the capitalist profit system, the source of the never-ending assault on dockworkers and the entire working class. We urge Hutchison and other workers to contact the SEP to discuss this perspective and how to fight for it.



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