

Australian dock, engineering workers express solidarity with US autoworkers

Our correspondents
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Over the past two months, dockworkers at Hutchison Ports and engineering workers at UGL, an engineering and services company, have confronted sweeping attacks on jobs and working conditions. In both cases, the unions have done everything they possibly could to prevent a struggle by the workers against the corporate dictated cost-cutting, engaging in back-room negotiations aimed at meeting the companies' demands.

At UGL, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) completely disregarded two majority votes by workers at the company's Auburn railway workshop in Sydney to reject layoffs. Instead, it is pushing through 43 redundancies at that factory and over 150 more across the company.

At Hutchison, where 97 workers learned they had been sacked by text message on the evening of August 6, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is in negotiations over a new workplace agreement that will see the layoffs proceed via "voluntary redundancies" and drastic changes imposed to existing working conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party have reported on the issues facing Hutchison and UGL workers, and published comments and statements urging them to take matters into their own hands, organise independently of the trade unions and develop a fight to defend their jobs, wages and conditions (see: "Australian maritime union moves to sell out Hutchison dispute" and "UGL workers face deepening job cuts in Australia and Asia"). The statements have drawn attention to the defiant stand taken by Fiat Chrysler workers in the US, who, in the face of immense pressure, voted to reject United Auto Workers (UAW) union's attempts to force through a pro-company contract.

Workers at both UGL and Hutchison spoke to WSWS reporters about the international significance of the US autoworkers' stand.

A UGL worker said: "Hats off to the American workers for being bold enough to take on the powers-that-be. They are on the front line—with the UAW the first pin to fall. By rejecting the UAW/Fiat-Chrysler contract, the autoworkers have taken a step that we're all going to have to take eventually. They've had the courage to step out first.

"What has happened to them sounds familiar to us, with workers being kept in the dark about the negotiations with the companies. It happens everywhere where there are unions.

"At UGL, the union [the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU)] promised to give us all the details of its last 'in-principle' enterprise agreement [contract]. The union compressed the material onto a page so much that you would have needed a magnifying glass to read it. No one was even going to bother reading it. Blokes on the floor had to demand readable copies.

"In the end, we got our cost-of-living pay rise but we definitely didn't gain anything. The agreement strengthened the company. It gave UGL more powers over written warnings and so on, making it easier to sack workers.

"Hopefully the rest of the world gets to hear about the step taken by the American workers. There's been no news about it here, except on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Their stand can spread internationally. People will start to realise that there's a fight going on.

"Without the support of the socialists, however, and then a true socialist government, workers can't realise their needs.

"Hopefully, the autoworkers won't get bought off by

a shonky deal that the union comes up with. That would be the biggest mistake they could make. They should stop nothing short of what they are fighting for.”

A sacked Hutchison Ports worker in Brisbane, one of the 97 sacked by the company via text message in Sydney and Brisbane on August 6, said the American autoworkers should “hang in there and stick to what they believe in. We all have to fight for a better future, not just for ourselves, but for our kids. We don’t want the fat cats taking all the money.”

He said that, like the autoworkers, the Hutchison workers were being kept in the dark by the company and the union. “We have been out the gate for nine weeks now, and we’re still no better off.”

A retrenched Hutchison Ports worker in Sydney said: “If the American workers are fighting back, then that’s great. There has to be solidarity around the globe. It’s important what they are doing.

“Our union, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), has kept telling us that they will pick up the phone and get support for us overseas, but they never seem to make the calls! Why not unleash the beast from the start?

“Like the United Auto Workers members, we are not getting the full story from our union. A lot is going on behind closed doors between the company and the union. We need answers, and we’re not getting them. All the unions are getting their pockets lined by the companies.

“I have been mostly sitting by the phone for nine weeks now, waiting to hear what the union is doing, trying to live on base rate pay, which is not enough to pay the bills. If the American workers take a stand, I’m all for it!”

Another UGL worker, who was recently retrenched by the company, said the stand taken by the American autoworkers was “both a great step forward and an inspiration to workers all over the world.”

He commented: “Their courageous stand against the union officialdom and Fiat-Chrysler is to be applauded. It is a shining example to be followed by workers around the globe. This United Auto Workers apparatus does nothing but cut backroom deals with management, politicians and the owners of industry behind the backs of the union members and against the very interests of its members.”

The retrenched UGL worker added: “The union

officialdom in Australia does exactly the same—backroom deals and distortion of facts. The unions’ cringing subservience to the capitalist system, to its legalities, shows itself over and over again in every sacking, reduction in workers’ living standards, cut in work conditions, and wage freezes. The list of betrayals knows no bounds. There is no line they will not cross.

“The owners of industry constantly cry poor, the union cries that the capitalists will shut the company, so the workers have to take a pay cut and reduction in conditions. It is time for workers to take their own political action against the rich, that 1 percent layer that now owns more wealth than the other 99 percent put together.”

The sacked UGL worker said he wanted to send a message to the US autoworkers: “Your struggle in the US is our struggle. We have the same enemy, no matter where workers live.”

The WSWs and SEP urges workers in Australia who want to discuss our perspective to contact us.



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