

Amid moves to sell-out Hutchison workers, Maritime Union of Australia threatens WSWWS

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is preparing a major betrayal of Hutchison Ports' workers, which will have ramifications for all waterfront workers and the working class as a whole. This was indicated by the hysterical reaction of senior MUA officials to the attempt by a WSWWS reporting team to cover an open-air meeting yesterday at a "community picket" outside the Hutchison terminal in Sydney. The meeting was called amid a stream of media reports that the MUA has agreed, not only to Hutchison's demands for the elimination of jobs, but to drastic cuts to workers' conditions.

MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer and assistant branch secretary Joe Deakin, along with several other officials, physically blocked the WSWWS team from getting within 20 metres of the meeting, where some of the 97 Hutchison workers who had been sacked in Sydney and Brisbane on August 6 had gathered to obtain information. Most of the MUA's National Council, made up of officials from across the country, were present.

WSWS correspondents attempted to hand out flyers to Hutchison workers, who were walking from the terminal to join the meeting. MUA officials accosted the workers, screaming at them not to take any leaflets. An MUA delegate from DP World, another waterfront company, grabbed leaflets out of the hands of one WSWWS correspondent and poured coffee over them.

Paul McAleer shouted infantile insults and slanders at the WSWWS team to try and justify the union's actions in front of the Hutchison workers, who were looking on at the spectacle.

In arguably McAleer's most absurd statement, he screamed that the WSWWS was "crawling up to the bosses." McAleer is one of the MUA officials who have been involved in weeks of closed-door meetings with Hutchison management, and in the Fair Work Commission industrial court, negotiating, behind workers' backs, on how to impose the company's dictates.

Among other slanders, McAleer shouted that the WSWWS and SEP were "anti-working class" and the "most anti-democratic organisation I've ever seen"—as he made physical threats to prevent the WSWWS from accurately reporting on precisely how the MUA was attempting to sell the deal it has struck with Hutchison. As for anti-working class, McAleer is a member of the historically discredited Stalinist organisation, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which to this day defends all the crimes committed against the socialist movement and the international working class by Stalin's regime and its political heirs.

The hysteria of McAleer and other MUA officials stems from the fact that the WSWWS and SEP have consistently warned workers from the day the dispute began that the union would work with the company against them. The MUA's main fear is that the information and alternative perspective provided by the WSWWS has won an audience among a significant layer of Hutchison workers in Sydney and Brisbane, and that the union could face the rejection of its pro-company agreement. The repeated attempts by the MUA, over the past several weeks, to prevent WSWWS correspondents from speaking with workers are part of its efforts to intimidate and suppress opposition.

As a Hutchison worker in Sydney told the WSWWS last 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 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..."

Based on a press release by the Fair Work Commission, as well as media reports and statements by Hutchison management, the MUA appears to have agreed to the following:

* **"Enhanced" redundancies:** The union has agreed to job cuts. Hutchison workers in Sydney and Brisbane will be

offered a voluntary redundancy package and immense pressure will be applied to them to ensure that 100 workers accept it.

*** A new workplace enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) to be finalised by November 16:** According to Hutchison acting CEO Mark Jack, the new EBA will cut workers' conditions down to "comparable terms to our competitors." In 2013, when Hutchison set up operations in Australia, it offered better terms of employment than the two main waterfront companies, DP World and Asciano, in order to recruit a skilled workforce.

Media reports indicate that the MUA has agreed to:

* An increase in the base workweek from 30 hours to 35 hours, stripping workers of overtime payments

* The reduction of company superannuation [retirement] payments from 12 percent to the normal rate of 9.5 percent

* The designation of public holidays as "voluntary," with unspecified implications for the penalty rates normally paid for working on public holidays

* "Flexible" rostering arrangements

* The introduction of casual labour for the first time

Workers who accept a redundancy will nominally be first in line for any casual jobs that become available. Such an agreement is an admission by the MUA that many of them will be unable to find new full-time jobs.

The elimination of positions at Hutchison is being pushed through under conditions where there are next to no other jobs on the waterfront; Australia's "boom" in mining industry activity has collapsed, and there are growing forecasts of recession and a sharp spike in unemployment.

A sacked Hutchison worker in Brisbane told the WSWS that he had been looking for other work, because he cannot meet his mortgage and other expenses on the 30-hour flat rate wage being paid by the company as part of its deal with the MUA. "But in all the jobs I have applied for," he said, "I have not found one with less than 3,500 applicants."

Likewise, one of the retrenched workers in Sydney said he had been working as a temporary casual for three weeks with another major employer, but was laid off as soon as he let it be known that he wanted a permanent position.

A report last week in the *Australian* strongly suggests that Hutchison and the MUA are seeking to slash workers' conditions in order to assist the transnational conglomerate, the largest port operator in the world, to sell off its Australian operations. Since entering as the third terminal operator on the waterfront in 2013, Hutchison has only secured 3 percent of the local market. DP World stills holds 53 percent and 44 percent is held by Asciano, which was recently taken over by global investment giant Brookfield.

Among the potential buyers of Hutchison are Filipino corporation International Container Terminal Services, or a

joint operation by freight companies' Aurizon and Qube.

DP World and Asciano workers also need to take the sharpest warning from what is taking place at Hutchison. They will face management demands for any concessions provided by the MUA to Hutchison, or to the new owners of the third terminal operations, that go beyond the conditions under which they are currently employed.

Waterfront workers everywhere need to assert their independence from the MUA and take a stand against the endless restructuring that the union has implemented on behalf of the waterfront companies. Independent rank-and-file workplace committees should be immediately formed to plan out a unified industrial and political campaign against the dictates of the corporations and their defenders in the federal Turnbull government, the state governments and the trade unions. An appeal should be made to the workers facing job destruction and attacks on their conditions at BlueScope Steel, the car industry, across mining, in retail and throughout the public sector, for a unified counter-offensive in the interests of the working class.

As the WSWS and SEP wrote in its statement of August 29, "Hutchison Ports dispute at the crossroads": "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."

During the next days, the WSWS and SEP urge Hutchison workers to discuss and prepare an overwhelming "No" vote to the EBA that is being prepared by the company and the MUA, and which, under the FWA's regulations, will be put to a secret ballot once it is finalised.

Hutchison and other waterfront workers can contact the SEP here to discuss this perspective and how to fight for it.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact