

Australian unions peddle anti-Chinese chauvinism as they enforce job destruction

Mike Head
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Faced with a rapid collapse of their membership, Australia's trade unions are pushing reactionary anti-Chinese chauvinism in a desperate campaign to divert workers' hostility to their central role in policing an accelerating wave of retrenchments across the country.

Over the past few weeks, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has convened forums in 23 "marginal" federal electorates denouncing the Liberal-National government's recently signed China Australian Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) as "bad news for Australian jobs."

The campaign seeks to blame Chinese workers, and Chinese companies, for the growing unemployment in Australia—more than 800,000 workers are currently jobless officially. Glossy ACTU brochures distributed at the events declare that ChAFTA "puts local workers and local jobs at risk" because Chinese companies will "bring in temporary skilled workers to work on projects."

This anti-Chinese propaganda was being mounted this week as the US, backed by Australia, conducted a military provocation against China in the South China Sea that raises the real risk of a war in which Australian workers would be urged to fight their fellow Chinese workers.

Tens of thousands of job losses are taking place throughout basic industries, such as the car plants, steelworks, mines, engineering, ports, electricity and Australia Post.

Chinese workers are not responsible for a single one of these job cuts. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers are also facing retrenchment as a result of the global slump.

Far from opposing any of this job destruction, the unions are working with the Australian and global transnational companies to suppress any opposition in the working class.

Even as the ACTU meetings were underway, the unions struck an agreement with BlueScope Steel, an Australian company, to axe 500 jobs, freeze wages for three years and slash working conditions. This was done in order to boost the company's profits, falsely claiming that this would halt the closure of the Port Kembla steelworks near Wollongong.

Having imposed similar attacks for many years in the car plants, the unions are assisting Ford, General Motors and Toyota to shut down the entire car manufacturing industry by 2017, eliminating more than 5,000 jobs directly and an estimated 150,000 more flow-on jobs. From the ACTU down, the unions have suppressed workers' opposition to the closures, insisting that nothing can be done, because wages and conditions are "uncompetitive" in Australia.

Speaking at the event in Penrith, in Sydney's western suburbs, attended by only about 100 people on Wednesday night, ACTU president Ged Kearney denied that the union campaign was "racist" and "xenophobic." But she proceeded to insist that "foreign workers" would undermine "our" jobs, wages and conditions. "We don't want cheap labour in our country," she declared.

Kearney made no mention of a media release she issued two days earlier in which the ACTU congratulated the Australian Workers Union's "readiness to come to the table and seek an outcome" with BlueScope. She applauded "the willingness of workers to take a gutsy, long-sighted decision to secure this outcome." In reality, the AWU and other unions bullied the Port Kembla workers at a stop work meeting into accepting an assault on their jobs, living standards and conditions by threatening them with the closure of the plant unless they submitted to BlueScope's dictates.

At the Penrith forum, Unions New South Wales secretary Mark Lennon sought to provide a rationale for the union enforcement of job destruction, without making any specific reference to BlueScope or any other mass sacking. He stated that unions had to "create jobs, as well as defend them" because "jobs come and go."

Thus, while scapegoating Chinese workers, the unions are promoting the lie that the accelerating onslaught on jobs amid the deepening impact, in China and internationally, of the financial crisis that erupted in 2008, is simply a "transition" to new jobs growth in other industries, not part of a fundamental breakdown in global capitalism.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union

(CFMEU) forestry division national president Jane Calvert told the forum that the union campaign was “not against China; it’s about jobs.” Yet she condemned ChAFTA as “not fair for local manufacturing” because it allegedly retained Chinese tariffs while eliminating Australian tariffs.

Calvert’s presentation was in line with the ACTU brochure, which sides with the Australian-based businesses, represented by the Australian Industry Group (AIG), that depend on protectionism to bolster their profits. Citing a submission by the AIG and a statement by CFMEU national secretary Michael O’Connor, the brochure accuses the Australian government of being “outsmarted” by the Chinese government to the detriment of Australian businesses.

The 23 targeted electorates are ones that the Labor Party needs to win back from the Liberal-National Coalition at the next federal election, scheduled for next year, in order to regain office. Conscious of the hostility in the working class toward the Labor Party, however, none of the speakers actually called for a vote for Labor, which launched the avalanche of job destruction before being defeated in a 2013 landslide.

Having falsely advertised the events as “debates” on ChAFTA, the unions sought to prevent any critical discussion or expressions of opposition to the attacks that Labor and the unions have carried out. At the Penrith meeting, which was held in a club with free food and an open bar, the question and answer period was confined to 10 minutes. Participants were instructed, at the last minute, that no comments were permitted and questions must be submitted in writing, rationed to one per table.

Nevertheless, interventions by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) at the Penrith event and one at The Entrance, north of Sydney, exposed the fraudulent and chauvinist character of the union campaign. SEP members and supporters distributed copies of the SEP statement, “An internationalist strategy to oppose the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement,” winning an appreciative response from many in attendance.

The SEP statement denounces the unions’ poisonous nationalism, while opposing ChAFTA from the standpoint of unifying the working class in Australia, China and around the world against the devastating attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions being produced by the worsening global capitalist crisis.

Asking a question at the Penrith meeting, SEP national secretary James Cogan first pointed out that the union’s anti-Chinese campaign was being waged as both the Turnbull government and the Labor Party opposition were “dragging Australia into a war with China as a result of the US alliance.”

Citing BlueScope as an example, Cogan asked why any worker should believe the unions’ claims to be concerned about jobs when they are helping companies everywhere, via union agreements, to “push through restructuring, cutting jobs and conditions,” including wage penalty rates.

In response, Kearney said she rejected the “premise” of the question, because unions were “fighting the exploitation of workers,” but was silent on the role of the unions in policing job losses at BlueScope, the car industry and the other major job losses.

The forums at Penrith and The Entrance, where Kearney and Lennon also spoke, attracted just about 100 people each, mainly union officials and delegates, and some older workers. This was despite weeks of prominent CFMEU television ads pushing the anti-ChAFTA campaign and months of local campaigning.

Figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics this week gave an indication of the underlying haemorrhaging of union membership as a result of their collaboration with the employers. Union members are either losing their jobs or quitting the unions in disgust.

During the 12 months to last August, overall membership fell from 17 to 15 percent of the workforce, and only 11 percent in the private sector. These are record lows, down from 40 percent overall membership in 1990. Today there are almost as many ex-union members—1.5 million—in the workforce as union members—1.6 million. Most young workers see no reason to join—94 percent of 15- to 19-year-olds have never been a union member.

This collapse is deeply rooted. From the 1980s, the globalisation of production shattered the previous union perspective of seeking to obtain limited concessions for workers within the framework of a nationally regulated economy. Instead, the unions committed themselves to making corporate Australia “internationally competitive.” Under their Accords with the Hawke-Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, the unions functioned as industrial policemen to break the resistance of workers to Labor’s pro-market program, and this role has continued ever since.

Now, the unions are mounting an anti-Chinese campaign that dovetails with the ideological and military preparations of the US and its closest ally, Australia, for a war against China.



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