

Australian union escalates nationalist campaign over shipping layoffs

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has stepped up its reactionary, nationalist campaign against foreign shipping workers, acting in collaboration with the Labor Party, a host of other trade unions and several cross-bench senators.

The MUA has established an “Australian jobs embassy” outside federal parliament in Canberra, and declared that recent shipping layoffs saw workers “sacked for being Australian.” This campaign is aimed at dividing seafarers and other workers along national lines and preventing an internationally unified struggle in defence of all jobs and for decent wages and improved working conditions.

The union has cynically seized upon two incidents, both related to moves by the Liberal-National Coalition government to abolish cabotage laws, which mandate that Australian-flagged and crewed vessels be used on domestic shipping routes. The MUA is demanding the maintenance of the laws, and the abolition of government-issued permits granting exemptions.

On February 5, in the early hours of the morning, armed police forcibly removed sacked workers who were occupying the CSL Melbourne in Newcastle. Eighteen workers had occupied the vessel the previous week, after being ordered to sail it to Singapore, where it would be scrapped and they would lose their jobs.

Just five workers were on board and were confronted by some 18 police. Altogether, more than 50 police took part in the operation, which involved two police boats and multiple paddy wagons. None of the workers was arrested or charged. The aggressive police operation followed an order from the Fair Work Commission—the pro-business industrial court established by the previous Labor government with the support of the unions—for the workers to disembark. The Federal Court upheld the order the day before the

police raid.

The Coalition government had granted Pacific Aluminum, a Rio Tinto subsidiary, a temporary license to replace the CSL Melbourne with a foreign-crewed and flagged vessel. For five years, the ship had transported alumina from Gladstone, in Queensland, to supply the company’s smelter in Tomago, near Newcastle. The company claims that the CSL Melbourne is too large for its current operations, following the closure of the nearby Kurri Kurri smelter in 2014.

According to the MUA, the replacement vessel is owned by a Greek company and operated by a crew who will be paid as little as \$2 an hour.

The attack on the CSL Melbourne crew followed the January 13 removal of seafarers occupying the MV Portland by company thugs working for transnational mining company, Alcoa. That crew also had been instructed to sail to Singapore, for the scrapping of the ship last November last year, eliminating their jobs.

According to the MUA, a further 2,000 shipping and flow-on jobs may be destroyed if the bid to scrap cabotage laws is successful. A government bill to overhaul shipping regulations was defeated in the Senate last November, with the Labor Party, the Greens and some cross-bench senators voting it down.

However, the union’s claim to be mounting a struggle against the shipping job cuts is an utter fraud. The crews of both the CSL Melbourne, and the MV Portland were isolated by the union and left to their fate. In both cases, just a handful of workers were left aboard the ships after court orders to disembark, amid company preparations to remove them.

Opening the union’s “Australian jobs embassy” this month, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin declared: “We’ve got rights to work in our country, in

our own industry.” The refrain has been repeated at protests called by the unions, and addressed by Labor Party speakers, accompanied by placards declaring “sacked for being Australian” and “Aussie jobs, Aussie ships, Aussie cargo.”

The union campaign echoes the rhetoric employed by the Labor and Coalition parties in the “war on terror,” directly feeding in to calls to boost “national security” and the military. The MUA is encouraging its supporters to send emails to federal politicians insisting: “A strong merchant navy is also integral to national security, which has been demonstrated here and throughout the world during times of unrest.” The proposed email concludes: “We are an island nation. Don’t sign our domestic shipping industry away to foreign interests.”

This nationalist demagoguery seeks to cover up the fact that the recent sackings are part of a relentless global restructuring of the shipping industry, accelerated by a plunge in international trade and the slump in the world economy.

One indication is the fall of the Baltic Dry Index, which measures the cost of shipping dry goods by sea, to just 295 points, its lowest level since 1985. The index reached peaks of 11,000 points before the financial crisis of 2007-08.

Numbers of freight carriers are now operating “zombie ships” transporting goods at a loss. According to Baltic Index chief executive Jeremy Penn, the average daily fee for the largest freight vessels is down to just \$2,700, from a former range of \$15,000-\$20,000 and heights of up to \$250,000 in 2008. But operating costs are often as high as \$7,500 a day.

The decline is leading to fierce competition, and an onslaught on seafarers’ jobs, wages and conditions everywhere. Last year, Maersk, the world’s largest container-ship operator, slashed 4,000 jobs from its land-based operations. The Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO) predicts that more dry bulk carriers will be scrapped during 2016 than any previous year.

The unions are hostile to the fight to unify seafarers around the world in a common struggle against the shipping conglomerates, and in defence of all jobs, for decent wages, and working conditions. Instead, they seek to line workers up behind sections of the Australian shipping industry, as well as the Labor

Party, which has played a central part in the destruction of maritime jobs.

Following round after round of layoffs, overseen by successive Labor and Coalition governments, it is estimated that there are less than 1,000 seafaring jobs left in Australia. The MUA has played the decisive role in this process. It has collaborated with shipping and port companies in the destruction of thousands of jobs, telling its members they must accept concessions to make national-based employers globally competitive.

Last November, having isolated dock workers opposing sackings at Hutchison Ports, the MUA signed a deal for over 60 redundancies, along with further casualisation and other attacks on conditions. Most recently, the union pledged to prevent strike action by dock workers over ongoing negotiations for a new enterprise agreement with Patrick Stevedoring.

Seafarers operate in a highly integrated global industry. That is why any struggle to defend jobs and conditions must be based on the perspective of uniting workers internationally. That means opposing the trade unions and their divisive nationalist programs, which serve to pit workers against each other along national lines.



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