

# Australia: Brewery maintenance workers rally to defend jobs, wages

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The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) organised a protest in South Melbourne on Tuesday of Carlton & United Breweries (CUB) maintenance workers who are facing drastic cuts to pay and conditions.

While the workers are seeking to resist a push by the company to place them on new contracts that slash wages by up to 65 percent, the unions' aim is to ensure that the union officials are not sidelined by the corporate restructuring. They convened the rally outside the company's headquarters to place pressure on CUB executives to collaborate with them in cutting costs.

CUB sacked its entire maintenance workforce, consisting of 54 fitters and electricians, four weeks ago. The workers were called to a local hotel and told they could reapply for their jobs if they signed individual contracts with body hire company Catalyst, an offshoot of Programmed Skilled. The workers were not allowed to see the contracts before signing. The new contracts included wholesale pay cuts, and forced workers onto more "flexible" rosters.

All the CUB workers took a stand and refused to countenance the deal.

One of the maintenance electricians, Drew, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* at the protest: "I was called into the hotel and told we were made redundant, effective immediately, told not to go on site," he explained. "We could apply for our jobs again that day, but they wouldn't tell us on what conditions. We have to go into the job interview to find out what the job conditions will be like, what the pay rates are ... Such a pay cut will mean I'll have to do things differently around the house to live, like anyone with a pay cut."

Geoff, a CUB worker with 35 years' experience,

added: "It's going to be at least a 50 percent pay cut and they can make us work any hours they want."

The unions have worked to wear down and isolate the workers. The AMWU and ETU, which cover the workers, have promoted a "community picket" outside the plant in Abbotsford since the sackings. This token action forms part of the unions' determination to confine the workers within the straitjacket of the Fair Work industrial regime enacted by the former Labor government, which bans nearly all industrial action.

Production has continued at the CUB plant, with scab maintenance workers crossing the "community picket" unhindered. Other workers in the facility, covered by the United Voice union, have not been called out on strike, thus helping CUB maintain operations.

The central concern of the AMWU and ETU is that CUB is attempting to force the workers to sign a non-union agreement, thereby dispensing with their services. Across numerous industries in the past period, the unions, including the AMWU and ETU, have repeatedly demonstrated their role as an industrial police force for big business and finance capital.

In the brewery industry alone since 2012, the unions have blocked any struggle by workers against the destruction of a total of at least 180 jobs by Lion Nathan in Perth and CUB in Melbourne and Warnervale, north of Sydney.

At Tuesday's rally, the sacked maintenance workers were joined by a contingent of trade union officials and a small number of construction workers from nearby building sites. Union officials addressing the rally combined empty demagoguery with reactionary nationalist denunciations of the company.

An AMWU statement posted on its web site features the union's assistant secretary Craig Kelly declaring the workers were "helping to deliver Australia's most

iconic beer brands” but “CUB, which was once a proud Australian company, has thrown them under a bus ... CUB was built up on the basis that workers got a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work and it’s time the now-South African owned brewer gave Aussie workers a fair go.”

This bluster is aimed at covering up the role of the trade unions, in Australia and internationally, in working with governments and corporations to boost corporate profits at the expense of workers’ living standards. It also serves to divide CUB workers from their counterparts around the world, who are facing similar attacks on jobs and conditions.

Workers at CUB are involved in a struggle with a transnational giant. CUB is owned by the British and South African SABMiller, the second largest brewer and beverage company in the world. It is currently in discussions to amalgamate with the world’s largest brewer, Belgian-Brazilian Anheuser-Busch InBev, in a deal estimated to be worth more than \$100 billion.

The merged entity would control 30 percent of the world’s breweries. Anheuser-Busch InBev is notorious for slashing the workforce of companies it acquires. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Anheuser-Busch InBev eliminated 1,400 jobs, or about 6 percent of Anheuser-Busch’s workforce, after acquiring the American brewer in 2008.

The CUB workers’ fight for their jobs coincided with the federal election crisis. The uncertain election outcome has only raised the determination of the corporate elite to develop new forms of authoritarian rule to push through the kind of austerity measures against the working class seen in Europe and the US, including deep inroads into wages and conditions.

This underscores the fact that the CUB workers’ struggle is a political one. To advance their fight, the workers need to take the leadership out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. A rank-and-file committee is needed to unite with other brewery workers, in Australia and internationally, and turn out to other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks on jobs and wages, such as the car and construction industries.

Such a campaign would become a lightning rod for the mass social discontent and opposition that found expression in the anti-establishment vote in the last election. What is required above all, however, is the

adoption of a new political perspective, based on the fight for a workers’ government and for socialist policies.



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