

Australian brewery still operating as unions isolate sacked workers

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More than three months since they were sacked for refusing to accept major cuts in wages and working conditions, 55 maintenance electricians and fitters from Carlton & United Breweries (CUB), remain isolated on a union-controlled protest picket outside the company's Abbotsford plant in Melbourne. The facility produces some of Australia's highest-selling beers, including Carlton Draught, Carlton Dry, VB, Crown Lager and Pure Blonde, as well as Mercury and Strongbow ciders.

The workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). They were informed on June 10 that CUB had replaced Quant, the contractor for which they previously worked, and they would be reemployed by Catalyst Recruitment only if they accepted a 65 percent wage cut and the elimination of hard-won conditions. Catalyst is an offshoot of Programmed Skilled, one of Australia's largest labour hire companies.

Catalyst Recruitment's non-union enterprise agreement, which was endorsed by just three workers two years ago in Western Australia, only pays 50 cents above the minimum hourly rate for maintenance workers and allows management to change rosters and shifts at will. It was ratified by the Fair Work Australia industrial relations court in late 2014 and now applies to Catalyst employees in manufacturing, building and construction, mining, electrical and communications nationally.

The sacked fitters and electricians have won support from important sections of the working class—on September 8 around 3,000 metal, building and other workers marched to the Victorian state parliament house and several hundred demonstrated in Brisbane over the sackings. But the unions have opposed any unified industrial and political action to win reinstatement of the maintenance workers.

From the outset, the unions diverted the workers into a "community picket" outside the plant and called on workers to sign petitions and boycott CUB products. Scab maintenance workers continue to cross the protest picket and, apart from one stop-work meeting called last month by United Voice, the union covering production workers, the Abbotsford plant continues operating.

CUB has also boosted output at its other facilities.

The consumer boycott and other harmless protest stunts organised by the unions are aimed at keeping the sacked maintenance workers locked into the repressive Fair Work industrial regime and demonstrating to CUB and other employers that the unions can deliver companies' cost-cutting demands.

Last week, Programmed Skilled, Catalyst's parent company, announced it would end its contract with CUB and withdraw its workers over the next two months. While the ETU and the AMWU claimed the decision "a victory," CUB has declared it will not employ the maintenance workers.

The unions' only real objection to what has happened at Abbotsford is that they have been pushed out of any involvement in the new labour hire agreement. The AMWU, the ETU and other brewery unions have long worked with the brewing company to cut costs.

In 2009, 115 maintenance workers struck in protest against CUB's decision to end direct employment of all maintenance workers and outsource maintenance to ABB Australia. The strike action was shut down by the ETU and the AMWU, which negotiated an agreement that reduced the number of maintenance workers by almost half and slashed conditions.

In 2012, 33 jobs were axed when CUB shut down one of its seven production lines at the plant. United Voice refused to defend the workers, instead working with

management to negotiate the cuts through “voluntary” redundancies. Two years later, 64 workers at the CUB’s Bluetongue brewery in New South Wales (NSW) were sacked when the company closed the factory.

ETU Victorian secretary Troy Gray told the September 8 rally in Melbourne that in 2015 the unions helped Abbotsford management cut production costs from \$4 to \$2.50 for a slab of 24 beers. Gray and other union officials have appealed to CUB management to reemploy the maintenance workers as part of the company’s permanent workforce because it would save the corporation money.

Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Dave Oliver told the rally that unions provided the best environment for company profits. “We [the unions] sit down and negotiate agreements, they have a set term. If we’re going to do an agreement, normal duration is for three years, and both parties sign up to a provision that says, ‘Over the next three years there’ll be no extra claims,’” he declared.

Oliver said labour hire companies, such as Catalyst, were “gaming the system.” He has called on the federal Labor Party opposition to support a Senate inquiry into what he claimed were “legal loopholes” to slash wages and working conditions.

To claim that the “system is being gamed” is false. Catalyst’s actions are entirely within the framework of the 2009 Fair Work Act, which was imposed by the Rudd Labor government and backed by the entire trade union movement.

The unions, moreover, work hand in glove with labour hire companies. Replacing permanent workers with contract and casual workers began in earnest under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996. Tens of thousands of workers are now employed by labour hire companies.

CUB has made clear it will intensify its attacks on jobs and conditions at Abbotsford to bring it into line with its “more competitive” breweries. Last month, CUB told the media that the plant’s “generous conditions” were “unsustainable.”

CUB’s offensive is in line with an escalating global assault on pay rates and demands for increased productivity. The company is owned by the SABMiller, which made a \$US2.9 billion profit last year. The second biggest brewer in the world, it is currently being

taken over by AB InBev, the world’s largest brewer.

The deal, worth over \$US100 billion, will see the consolidated company control at least 30 percent of international beer sales. SABMiller and AB InBev, which currently employ 70,000 and 150,000 workers respectively, are expected to destroy 5,500 jobs and this will impact on CUB workers.

In every industry, the demands of the corporate elite are being implemented with trade union assistance.

At the Arrium steelworks in Whyalla, South Australia, the AMWU, Australian Workers Union and other unions have urged workers to accept a 10 percent pay cut in preparation for a future sale of the company.

At BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, NSW, the AWU has collaborated with the company to boost profits by destroying a total of 1,500 jobs and cut wages and conditions over the past five years.

Collie, a coal mining company in Western Australia, is currently attempting to push through a 15 percent wage cut. Collie miners are organised by the AMWU, the same union covering the CUB fitters.

This makes clear that the defeat of the CUB sackings and the fight to defend jobs and conditions of workers everywhere requires a break from the stranglehold of the unions. This means adopting a new political perspective, based on a socialist program to unite workers internationally against the capitalist profit system.

To take forward this struggle CUB workers need to form democratically-elected rank-and-file committees independent of, and in opposition to the unions, and turn to all other sections of the working class confronting the same kinds of attacks on their wages and conditions.



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