

Australia: Sacked brewery workers return after union “productivity” deal

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24 December 2016

Between 40 and 50 maintenance workers at Melbourne’s Carlton United Brewery returned to work on December 6, six months after 55 of them were sacked for refusing to accept a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that would have slashed their wages by up to 65 percent.

The return to work came after an agreement negotiated by the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), Carlton United Brewery (CUB) executives, and Iain Ross, president of the Fair Work Commission, the federal workplace relations tribunal.

While the unions hailed the end of the dispute as a victory for the CUB workers, they have maintained a blanket silence over the terms of the secret agreement they brokered. Both the ETU and the AMWU refused to release any details to the *World Socialist Web Site*, while a Fair Work Commission media spokesperson told the WSWS that “matters heard in conference are subject to strict privacy laws and FWC privacy guidelines.” A Freedom of Information application would have to be made to potentially access any of the details.

The secrecy only underscores that the CUB return to work is yet another trade union sell out, one of scores of deals negotiated and imposed by the unions across Australia that have cut jobs, wages and hard-won working conditions.

A joint AMWU-ETU press release on December 6 stated: “All parties agreed to productivity and efficiency improvements that will be implemented at the brewery.”

Some additional detail was reported the following day by the *Australian Financial Review*, which stated that the agreement included “moderated wage outcomes” and greater worker “flexibility” on rosters,

overtime requests and rostered days off. This is likely the tip of the iceberg for the maintenance workers, who will be confronted with stepped up company demands for speedups and cuts to working conditions.

From the beginning of the dispute in June, the trade unions’ concern was not to defend wages and working conditions but to protect their own standing within the plant. CUB’s real crime, in the eyes of the unions, was to attempt to dispense with their services as they moved to boost corporate profits at the expense of their workforce.

In June, the 55 CUB maintenance workers, including skilled fitters and electricians, who were employed by the Quant contracting company, were told that they had to accept their re-employment, on vastly worse wages and conditions, through a new labour hire company, Catalyst Recruitment, a subsidiary of Programmed Skilled.

The move formed part of a wider restructuring of the brewing industry in Australia and internationally. CUB was recently taken over by the multi-billion dollar transnational company Anheuser-Busch InBev, the world’s largest beverage manufacturer.

The unions have repeatedly boasted of their role in boosting productivity and profitability at the CUB plant in Melbourne. In September, ETU Victorian state secretary Troy Gray said that the union had helped the company slash production costs from \$4 to \$2.50 for a slab of 24 beers.

The situation confronting the sacked maintenance workers at CUB was a direct result of the unions’ role in 2009, when the giant brewing company decided to end direct employment of its maintenance workers and outsourced the work. The new contracting arrangement triggered a strike by 115 workers, which was shut down by the ETU and the AMWU. The unions reached an

agreement that accepted the outsourcing, reduced the number of maintenance workers by almost half and slashed conditions.

The unions responded to the sackings in June by setting up a sham “picket” outside the plant. The so-called “community protest” had little effect on CUB during the six months that the dispute dragged on.

The unions, including United Voice and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, refused to call out their members still working in the plant, allowing production to continue as normal throughout. The unions attempted to cover their isolation of the sacked workers by calling for a boycott of CUB beers—a token action that had no impact on the company’s profits.

Union officials throughout Australia have hailed the return to work. Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Dave Oliver said the CUB deal was a “historic win” for the union movement. “We are glad to finally be able to end the boycott on CUB products, which are once again proudly union made at Abbotsford,” he declared.

On December 12, a rally of mainly union officials was held outside the CUB plant to mark the return to work by the maintenance staff. Maritime Union of Australia official Chris Cain was among those who spoke. “It doesn’t get any better than this,” he declared. “You need to go away from here and talk it [the ‘victory’] up.”

Also addressing the rally was pseudo-left local councillor Stephen Jolly. His appearance underscored the role of the pseudo-left organisations as political apologists for the union bureaucracy as it works with big business and finance capital to smash up the gains previously won by the working class.

If the unions are keen to “talk up” a CUB “victory,” it is only to cover their tracks in enforcing more mass layoffs, wage cuts, and productivity concessions in all key sectors of Australia industry—mining, manufacturing, construction, transport, maritime and retail.

The unions are currently in the final stages of delivering an “orderly closure” of the entire car industry in Australia, at the expense of tens of thousands of jobs.

Likewise in the steel industry, the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and AMWU have pushed through a 10

percent pay cut at the Arrium steelworks in Whyalla, South Australia in preparation for a future sale of the company. At BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, New South Wales, the AWU has collaborated with the company to boost profits by cutting wages and conditions and destroying a total of 1,500 jobs over the past five years.

A real battle to defend jobs and conditions can only take place in opposition to the unions and their defence of the profit system. The first step for the CUB workers is the formation of a rank-and-file committee and a turn to other sections of workers other industries facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle requires a fundamentally opposed political perspective to the class collaboration of the unions. Capitalism has nothing to offer workers but a future of mass unemployment, poverty and war. The defence of jobs is therefore completely bound up with the fight for a workers’ government and the abolition of the profit system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The author also recommends:

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