

Australian maritime union signs 13-year no-strike pledge with energy multinational

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) last week signed an agreement to prevent strikes and other industrial action at the \$34 billion Ichthys Liquefied Natural Gas project in northern Australia until 2030, in exchange for a commitment by the Japanese energy multinational Inpex to preference “Australian” workers for jobs at the site.

The pledge highlights the relationship between the reactionary nationalism of the unions, directed against overseas workers, and their role as an industrial police force of the employers.

The MUA and other unions denounce foreign workers in a bid to divide the working class and prevent any unified struggle against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions. At the same time, the union’s nationalist rhetoric serves to divert attention from its own role in enforcing the dictates of the major companies and suppressing industrial and political action by the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The *Australian Financial Review* hailed the MUA’s agreement as a “landmark deal” that “is unprecedented in length and is seen as ensuring stability during the project’s development and production stage.” The union had guaranteed “continuity of supply”—in effect reassuring the project’s corporate shareholders it will prevent any disruption from workers to the gas flows upon which their profits depend.

The deal includes an “enhanced disputes resolution procedure” to be overseen by Danny Cloghan, a retired commissioner from the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business industrial tribunal established by the last Labor government with the support of the unions.

Inpex group industrial relations manager Roland Houareau, said the company “would use the arrangement as an industrial relations platform for stakeholders, investors and boards in the future,” i.e., a

precedent to be used against workers at other sites. Labor Party opposition spokesman Brendan O’Connor also praised the agreement.

Western Australian MUA state secretary Christy Cain crudely summed up the union’s position, declaring: “We’ll work things through without taking strike action willy-nilly and work with the company to get this project done on time.” In other words, the MUA will impose productivity speed-ups, attacks on conditions and the destruction of jobs to ensure that the employer’s schedule is met.

The Ichthys development will become the longest gas export pipeline in the Southern Hemisphere, spanning 890 kilometres. It will source gas from the Browse Basin off the north coast of Western Australia, which will be transported to a processing plant near Darwin in the Northern Territory.

The MUA agreement covers drilling rigs, seismic vessels, supply vessels and accommodation vessels and will also apply to members of the Australian Maritime Officers Union and the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers.

Since its announcement, the project has faced a series of delays and cost blowouts. Contractors at the Darwin site, UGL and JKC were locked in a series of disputes over the past three years.

In late 2015, 400 workers were sacked at the site. Last October, up to 480 more were laid-off, including boilermakers, electricians, tradespeople and staff. In January, another 300 jobs were destroyed. In each instance, the unions involved, including the Construction Forestry Energy and Mining Union and the Electrical Trades Union, did everything they could to prevent the sackings from causing any “disruptions” to the project.

Last month, UGL, now owned by Spain’s CIMIC

Group and an American contractor CH2M Hill, pulled out of the project. Media reports have indicated that the Inpex deadline for production to start in September is now on an extremely tight timeline, indicating that workers will be placed under intense pressure by the company and the union.

Commenting on the agreement, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin pointed to the decades-long collaboration between the waterside union and the major employers.

Sounding like a company spokesman, Crumlin declared that such deals were critical to “investment certainty and security of supply.” He bragged: “Since the MUA and the other maritime unions signed a similar agreement covering the North West Shelf in the 1980s, not a single day has been lost to industrial action.” Crumlin was referring to agreements covering gas tankers and production in the massive oil and gas development area in north-western Australia.

Since the early 1980s, the MUA and its predecessors have overseen the decimation of maritime and seafaring jobs. During the Hawke Labor government’s Water Industry Reform from 1987–91, the union enforced the destruction of 4,500 jobs. In 1998, it isolated and betrayed waterside workers who had been locked out and victimised by Patrick Stevedores, paving the way for the elimination of 1,400 jobs (see: “What was the ‘victory’ on the Australian waterfront?”).

More recently, the MUA has sold out industrial action by maritime workers in defence of jobs and conditions, including during the 2015 Hutchison dispute, when the company sacked its 97-strong workforce in Sydney and Brisbane. The union shut down strike action and organised a deal with the company that cut 65 jobs and a host of working conditions (see: “Australian maritime union betrays Hutchison workers”).

These sellouts have gone hand in hand with nationalist rhetoric targeting foreign workers. The MUA, alongside Labor, the Greens and far-right nationalists such as Senator Jacqui Lambie, has campaigned for protectionist measures and the abolition of visa arrangements for overseas workers. All of them are seeking to divert mounting anger over the destruction of jobs and the worsening social crisis afflicting the working class in a nationalist and xenophobic direction.

Crumlin’s remarks on the Ichthys agreement followed the same line. “This announcement,” he declared, “provides great relief to our members and other Australian workers, many of whom are currently unemployed and rightly expect to have first crack at jobs in their own country.” He did not mention that widespread unemployment among seafarers and maritime workers is a direct product of the job-cutting enforced by the union.

In language indistinguishable from Senator Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigrant One Nation and other far-right parties, Crumlin stated: “These natural resources belong to the Australian people and are our sovereign wealth now and going forward.” Like every nationalist demagogue, Crumlin was covering over the class divide between the Australian corporate and financial elite, and millions of working people.

Crumlin’s remarks and the union’s no-strike pledge are a damning indictment of pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, which routinely hail the MUA as a “militant” and “left” union. In reality, the MUA, like its counterparts in Australia and internationally, functions as a company union and a peddler of nationalist poison.

The union’s reactionary attempts to divide workers along national lines are in direct opposition to the inherently international nature of the seafaring and maritime industry.

The alternative to the nationalism and corporatism of the unions is the fight for the unification of seafarers, maritime workers and other sections of the working class around the world in a common struggle against the drive by the corporate elite to slash jobs, wages and conditions. This fight must be directed against the capitalist system itself, which is the cause of the mounting unemployment and social hardships facing workers everywhere.



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