

# Australian maritime union maintains picket at Victorian port

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A picket organised by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is continuing to prevent operations at the Webb Dock East container terminal in the Port of Melbourne. While the MUA claims the action is to defend workers' conditions, its chief aim is to maintain its role as an industrial police force for the company.

The picket began at 5 a.m. on November 27 in response to the sacking of a casual worker, who is also an MUA representative. The worker's application for a government-provided Maritime Security Identification Card, which is legally required to work in the restricted landside zone, had been rejected, allegedly due to a 22-year-old criminal conviction. The employer, Victorian International Container Terminal (VICT), claims it could not continue to employ him in breach of federal laws.

A statement issued by the MUA deputy national secretary, Will Tracey, on November 28 said that 22 workers had similarly been refused government security cards. However, he said, the only worker targeted was a member of the MUA, and had recently taken court action against a plant manager accused of bullying and victimising workers.

It appears that few if any of the approximately 120 workers are on strike or participating in the action. All the employees work under an agreement with a rival union, the Australian Maritime Officers Union, which is not participating and has not released any statement.

The MUA's real concern is to gain a position for itself on the bargaining table with VICT, a local subsidiary of the Philippine-based port terminal operator giant, International Container Terminal Services, which earned a global revenue of over \$US1.1 billion in 2016. The company won the tender for the construction and operation of the port in 2014 from the Port of Melbourne through a public-private

partnership. The company's website claims that the terminal is now the most advanced in the world and Australia's "first fully-automated terminal."

Rather than reaching an agreement with the MUA, which covers workers at rival stevedoring companies, including nearby Patricks Stevedoring and DP World, VICT made a deal with the Australian Maritime Officers Union, threatening the position and flow of dues to the MUA apparatus.

On December 1, the company successfully obtained a seven-day legal injunction from the Supreme Court to prevent the MUA from organising or participating in any picketing within 100 metres of the terminal. The picket has therefore been officially continued under the name of a "community protest," and is being conducted by other unions, including the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). When *World Socialist Web Site* reporters went to the site yesterday, the picket was being maintained by a handful of union officials, with no workers to be found.

For the MUA and its allies, the picket is nothing but a cynical stunt aimed at putting pressure on the company and reviving their own standing in workers' eyes. This is under conditions where official union membership is as low as 4–5 percent among young workers, and millions of workers view the unions as corrupt pro-business outfits.

After the expiry of the Supreme Court injunction, the unions organised a rally outside the company gates yesterday at 10 a.m. Approximately 1,000 workers from nearby ports operated by Patricks Stevedoring and DP World attended the event.

While Patricks issued a statement condemning the work stoppage, a spokesman for the company confirmed to the *Daily Cargo News* on November 30 that it has already benefitted from the disruption caused

to its competitor. It gained business on a weekly cargo shipment from the south-East Asian OOCL Texas on December 3 that would normally have been handled by VICT.

Speaking at the rally, CFMEU head John Setka declared that the union was determined to oppose the restrictive and anti-democratic anti-strike laws under Fair Work Australia. “Everything we have today, every single thing we have today was won by breaking the law and taking industrial action.” He said that while the union “may get fined a few hundreds of thousands of dollars” for striking, “that’s what all the money the unions have got, that’s what it’s there for.”

Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus also told the rally that workers needed “stronger, better rights.”

Do the union officials expect workers to forget that the anti-strike laws currently in place under Fair Work Australia, which they now posture against, were written into law by the Rudd Labor government in 2008 with the support of the unions themselves? These laws make it virtually impossible for workers to strike, even within a narrow so-called enterprise bargaining period every three to five years, and criminalise workers who seek to strike in defence of workers at other companies.

Moreover, it is instructive to compare such comments to the unions’ actions when workers seek to fight against employers’ offensives and defend or improve their conditions. Then, the unions insist that their hands are tied by the industrial laws, as they work hand-in-hand with employers to reach sell-out agreements, which they browbeat workers into accepting in order to remain “internationally competitive.”

The CFMEU is currently overseeing a joint offensive with mining and manufacturing employers nationally, together with state and federal governments, driven by the deepening economic crisis of Australian capitalism. This month the CFMEU imposed an outright pay cut of 25 percent on workers at Griffin Coal in the Western Australian town of Collie.

The MUA’s real attitude to the workers was made clear when it betrayed a strike by Hutchison stevedoring workers in Sydney and Brisbane in 2015. The workers had maintained a week-long stoppage from August 7 against the sacking of 97 waterside workers. The union, whose only real demand was that the company use the union’s services in imposing the

attacks on its members, eventually shut down the strike, imposing an agreement which destroyed over 60 jobs, reduced overtime, and introduced new casual positions.

The agreement was praised by Hutchison for facilitating “the conversion of full-time employees to casuals” and helping “the company with greatly enhanced flexibility.” In that dispute, the MUA physically threatened members of the Socialist Equality Party, who exposed its preparations for a sellout, and sought to prevent workers from reading articles from the *World Socialist Web Site*. (See: “ Australian Maritime Union Betrays Hutchison workers “)

This was a continuation of the union’s role over decades in working with governments and employers to destroy thousands of maritime jobs, including though the Hawke Labor government’s Waterfront Industry Reform of 1987–1991 (4,500 jobs) and the Patrick’s dispute in 1998 (1,400 jobs).

Under conditions of growing alienation from their membership, the unions, and the MUA and CFMEU in particular, have turned to new mechanisms for raising funds through direct payments from employers, including through the creation of their own health insurance companies and training corporations (see: “What the royal commission into Australia’s trade unions revealed”).

It is symptomatic of the unions’ role that the current human resources and industrial relations director of VICT is Michael O’Leary, who from 1984 to 2007 was the MUA’s deputy national secretary. O’Leary followed the same path as countless other union officials who seamlessly transition from union offices to corporate boardrooms without changing their essential role—boosting company profits.



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