

Australian dock workers strike against threatened 60 percent wage cut

Our reporters
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About 145 dock workers in Melbourne yesterday began a four-day strike opposing a provocative move by their employer, Qube Ports, to junk an existing enterprise bargaining agreement and impose minimum award conditions. If successful, this would amount to a wage cut of as much as 60 percent, as well as the elimination of restrictions on unsafe shift lengths.

Qube Ports is a billion-dollar investment conglomerate that has taken over other dock companies in recent years, including P&O Automotive and General Stevedoring (2012) and Patrick (2016). Its drive to cut wages and conditions forms part of a wider corporate offensive against workers.

Qube's attacks on port workers have proceeded within the framework of the "Fair Work" industrial legislation imposed by the previous federal Labor government with the backing of the entire trade union apparatus, including the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which is now a division of the newly-formed Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

Qube Ports director Michael Sousa recently indicated the close collaboration between the company and the unions. He told the *Australian* newspaper that Qube had spent the last two-and-a-half years "negotiating" with the MUA, including 43 different meetings with union officials.

The MUA called the four-day strike after Qube applied to the Fair Work Commission, the federal industrial tribunal, to terminate the existing agreement and "renegotiate a new enterprise agreement in line with the award."

Reporting on the Qube application yesterday, the *Australian* stated: "If successful, it would be the first time an agreement has been terminated on the nation's wharves." This would potentially slash wage rates from

\$52.78 an hour to \$21.67, and annual salaries from \$96,000 to just \$39,000, a 59 percent cut.

If the corporate giant has its way, dock workers will also be subjected to further demands for lengthy and dangerous shifts. Qube employees previously worked 7 weeks on and 1 week off, but the MUA backed the elimination of this provision in 2015. At the time, the union touted worthless guarantees from the company that it would revert to these shift lengths when "trading conditions improved."

In reality, the 2015 union agreement has enabled Qube to force workers onto gruelling 12-hour night shifts for the past three years.

One worker, who has been on the docks for more than 20 years, told WSWs reporters yesterday: "They want us to do four 12-hour shifts in a row. Some people work as far away as Hastings [a regional town 60 kilometres outside Melbourne]. We have an 8-hour break between shifts, which is below industry standards. It should be at least 10 hours.

"People have left this job under these conditions. Fatigue is the main thing—there is also less manning, and the turnover of employees is high. After so many consecutive shifts it's extremely difficult. I live in Geelong [a regional city outside Melbourne], so it is effectively a 15-hour shift for me."

The worker explained that unsafe working conditions had caused deaths in recent years, and outlined how the company intimidated workers with the threat of sackings. "In the last 15 years we have lost three comrades," he said. "One was crushed by steel, another by a container. They have sacked eight workers here over the last six years. Many workers are on a final warning. There is a policy of a first and final warning."

Another worker, who has been at the port for 10 years, said: "We have to ring up at 4 p.m. to find out

what shift we are doing the next day. Conditions are ridiculous. The last two hours is the most dangerous. Fatigue is a big issue. They tell you to take a sickie if you're too tired. Then when we do they drag us in and haul us over the coals. The company has \$6 billion in assets and last year made \$100 million in profit. They say they are going broke whenever they are challenged!"

The MUA has isolated the 145 striking workers, with no other maritime workers mobilised in their defence. Industry group Shipping Australia has reported that only a maximum of five ships will be affected by the four-day stoppage.

The union is desperately seeking to reach a sellout agreement with Qube Ports. Following a two-day strike last month, the MUA had scheduled the latest industrial action to begin Wednesday but called it off at the last minute, according to the *Australian Financial Review*, "in an apparent bid to restart negotiations."

The strike only proceeded yesterday after Qube refused to resume discussions until all work bans were called off. The MUA's concern is not the company's anti-worker demands—the union is responsible for enforcing numerous regressive agreements that slashed jobs and eroded conditions. Rather, the union is fearful that Qube executives may be attempting to bypass the MUA, jeopardising its position at the negotiating table, where it bargains away the jobs, wages and conditions of workers, and ensures the privileged position of the union officialdom.

The MUA is seeking to divert the Qube workers behind the Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU) "change the rules" advertising campaign that is primarily aimed at boosting the Labor Party's electoral prospects. The campaign also aims to cover up the fact that all the unions supported the introduction of the "Fair Work" legislation, including its draconian anti-strike provisions, and have invoked it ever since to suppress any industrial or political struggle by workers.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus declared: "Qube are abusing loopholes and broken rules to enrich themselves at the expense of working people. We need to change the rules so that working people like the MUA members at Qube can win fair pay and good, secure jobs."

This is nothing but empty hot air. The entire record of the unions, including the MUA, demonstrates that they

function as an industrial police force of the corporate and financial elite.

The Qube strike is occurring 20 years after the 1998 Patrick Stevedores dispute on the Sydney docks. The MUA shut down that six-week strike against mass sackings and imposed the destruction of more than 600 jobs, about half the workforce, and the axing of a host of conditions. The betrayal established a benchmark for a continuous assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of port workers, imposed by the MUA.

Qube workers need to take their fight out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, by electing a rank-and-file committee and turning out to other sections of the working class, including other dock workers, construction and warehouse workers, and teachers and health workers.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective that rejects the corporatism and nationalism of the unions. This means the fight for a unified movement of workers around the world, aimed at establishing workers' governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing the major port and stevedoring companies under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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