Australian unions' bogus campaign over sacking of Longford maintenance workers

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Over recent weeks, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the national union federation, and its affiliates, have ramped up a bogus campaign over last year's sacking of 230 contract maintenance workers at Esso's onshore oil and gas processing plant at Longford, a town in regional Victoria.

The unions claim to have led a 12-month "struggle" against the job cuts. This is an utter fraud. In reality, they prepared the ground for the sackings, suppressed opposition to their implementation and have ensured that the plant's operations have continued without any disruption over the past year.

The real motivation of the campaign is to regain union coverage of the site's maintenance division, to ensure the unions keep their privileged position at the negotiating table, where they bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of workers they falsely claim to represent. At the same time, the ACTU is cynically invoking the dispute in its "Change the rules" marketing plan to re-elect a big business federal Labor government.

In February 2017, Esso—Exxon Mobile's Australian arm—awarded a five-year maintenance contract to UGL, an engineering and logistics firm, covering the Longford site and other gas plants across the state. UGL, which had just been taken over by CIMIC Group, a Spanish construction company notorious for its global cost-cutting operations, immediately imposed a sweeping restructuring of the conditions of the Longford maintenance workers.

Acting through one of its subsidiaries, MTCT Services, UGL sacked the workers in May 2017, demanding that they reapply for their jobs as casuals with substantial cuts to their wages and conditions.

Alongside losing permanent-employee allowances, the workers would have suffered pay reductions of between 15 and 35 percent, depending on their classification. An onerous fortnightly rotation was also introduced, replacing the previous week-on, week-off system, meaning employees would spend greater periods of time away from their families.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), the Australia Workers Union (AWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which covered the workers, issued toothless denunciations of the move. The cuts were carried out through a manoeuvre, whereby MTCT signed a new enterprise agreement with five interstate workers, who had no involvement in the Longford plant.

The unions made clear that their primary concern was that UGL's actions had circumvented the bargaining process, thereby threatening their negotiating position. UGL's tactics, however, were in compliance with the draconian Fair Work Australia industrial legislation, introduced by the previous federal Labor government, with the full support of the trade unions.

The unions responded to the sackings by establishing an impotent "community protest" alongside the road near the main gate to the plant. Falsely described as "pickets," such protests have become the stock-in-trade of the union bureaucracy, as it seeks to wear-down and demoralise workers involved in disputes.

Former employees and their family members, who have taken part in the protest over the past year, have spoken to local media about the deepening financial crisis they confront, making clear that they have been hung out to dry by the unions. Others have doubtless been forced to look for work elsewhere.

The unions did nothing to prevent the introduction of a new workforce, which is subjected to the cuts to pay and conditions contained in the new agreement. Union members in other divisions of the plant, and at Esso's other sites were instructed to continue to work as usual. No action was called at UGL's many factories and workshops across the country, where it has been imposing similar sackings and attacks on conditions.

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This was in line with the role of the unions in preparing the ground for sacking these maintenance workers.

In December 2016, 600 workers at Esso's offshore and onshore gas operations were set to take strike action, as part of a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The federal Fair Work Commission approved an application by the Victorian Labor government to effectively illegalise the stoppage, on the grounds that it threatened the state's energy supplies.

The unions hailed Labor's strike-breaking intervention as opening the way to new negotiations. In reality, as they well knew, it was the prelude to new attacks by Esso and its partners.

In an open letter published in the *Gippsland Times* last October, Gippsland ETU organiser Peter Mooney made clear that prior to sacking the maintenance workers, the unions had been preparing to impose cuts to their wages and conditions.

Mooney stated that during their backroom discussions for a new enterprise agreement, the unions had "offered to freeze wages for a number of years and to look at other offsets to support the new contractor (UGL)." He noted that the unions had played a similar role in other divisions of the Esso, writing: "The UGLK offshore workforce has not had a pay rise since 2014."

The record underscores the fraudulent character of a union protest on June 28, marking a year since the sackings. The event, which was attended by several hundred people, was stacked with union officials and delegates from Melbourne and across Victoria. This was to silence any opposition to the wretched role of the unions.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus was among the speakers. She repeated the bogus rhetoric of the "Change the rules" campaign, including its denunciations of tax evasion, growing social inequality and the stepped-up corporate offensive against workers.

McManus made clear that her real concern was ensuring the unions are not sidelined by the major corporations, and that they retain their function as labour hire entities. "In the end, it's Exxon Mobil who makes the decisions … Why shouldn't we be able to bargain with them?" she asked.

McManus touted union calls for limited changes to Fair Work industrial legislation. "The fact the independent umpire cannot even intervene is a huge issue, as is the right to strike," she said.

The supposed independent umpire, the Fair Work Commission, established by a federal Labor government, with the support of the unions, has intervened in countless disputes over the past decade. In every instance, its role has been to enforce sackings, ban strikes and impose the dictates of big business, as it was set up to do. The unions backed the provisions of the Fair Work laws that ban virtually all industrial action, and have invoked them ever since to suppress any industrial or political struggle by workers.

The unions welcomed Labor minister Lisa Chesters to posture as a defender of workers' rights at the rally. "A Shorten Labor government will change the law to end this corporate gaming of the Fair Work Act," she declared.

What Chesters really meant is that the draconian provisions of Fair Work would continue to be deployed against workers, but that Labor would ensure that the unions retain their valued position as an industrial police force of government and big business with a seat at the bargaining table.

Chesters' presence at the event demonstrates that the "Change the rules" campaign is aimed at subordinating mounting opposition among workers to the re-election of yet another big business Labor government, which will intensify the onslaught on jobs, wages and working conditions.

Workers in Longford, and across the country, must reject this bogus campaign. A genuine struggle in defence of workers' rights and conditions requires a break with the corporatised unions and the Labor Party and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. A socialist perspective is needed, aimed at establishing a workers' government, which would place the energy and gas corporations, along with the banks and big business, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

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