

Australian union prepares sellout after ending Alcoa strike

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At a union-convened meeting last week, workers at Alcoa's three aluminium refineries and two bauxite mines in Western Australia voted to end a 53-day strike after the Australian Workers Union (AWU) claimed the company had "addressed" the issue of "job security" in talks for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Some 1,500 workers walked off the job on August 8 after EA negotiations, which had been taking place for over a year-and-a-half, stalled. The indefinite stoppage also opposed Alcoa's application to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal industrial tribunal, to terminate the existing EA. This would enable the company to force workers onto base industry awards with massive pay reductions and sweeping cuts to conditions.

At last week's meeting at Pinjarra, south of Perth, numbers of workers reportedly spoke "passionately" against a return to work. The union steamrolled the widespread opposition by fraudulently claiming that Alcoa was committed to guaranteeing full-time jobs.

In reality, Alcoa's "job security" pledge is worthless. In line with a proposal from the AWU last month, the company merely said it would not make full-time employees "forcibly redundant" by outsourcing their work or replacing them with casual hires.

This deliberately vague clause will reportedly be included in the company's EA offer, to be voted on by workers later this month. It will do nothing to prevent Alcoa from implementing sweeping workplace changes, including by eliminating full-time jobs through natural attrition and voluntary redundancies.

Companies have used similar mechanisms over the past three decades, assisted by the unions, to shed tens of thousands of jobs, including in the resources, mining and manufacturing sectors.

Alcoa is persisting with its demand for a "modern

EA" to allow it "to manage our operations efficiently and productively" and give it "the ability to respond to changing market and operating conditions." In other words, the company is determined to secure an agreement that will drive up productivity and slash costs in order to gain a competitive edge in its fight for market share and profits.

This was highlighted in media comments by Alcoa Australia's managing director Michael Parker last month. He said calls for guarantees against redundancies were "not a reasonable expectation" and demanded that the company "be unshackled from outdated work practices."

The AWU has signalled its willingness to work with Alcoa to implement such changes. State secretary Mike Zoetbrood confirmed in August that the union had informed Alcoa it was "open" to proposals for the removal of minimum staffing levels.

In exchange for Alcoa's bogus commitment to "job security," the union has also agreed to a three-year wage freeze, thereby ensuring that millions more dollars will go into boosting Alcoa's profits and the bank accounts of its wealthy shareholders, at the direct expense of workers.

AWU state branch president Andy Hacking admitted the union's support for the effective pay cut, telling the media this month: "All along we made clear that we were not seeking to improve or extend existing pay and working conditions."

The union cynically announced it would not recommend workers accept Alcoa's latest EA offer in voting later this month. The AWU's claims that the end of the strike is a "victory," however, make clear that the union will do everything it can to suppress opposition and ram through the sell-out deal.

As part of this process, the company is maintaining

its application to the FWC to terminate the current work agreement, threatening workers with even deeper cuts to wages and conditions.

Alcoa's attacks on its workforce in Western Australia are part of a worldwide restructure announced by the company in 2009 that included a 13 percent cut to its global workforce, supposedly to offset then falling aluminium prices.

Alcoa is now determined to step up its restructuring operation to take advantage of a resurgence in aluminium prices resulting from a global shortage brought about by production cutbacks and by US tariffs on major producers such as China and Russia. This month, the price of aluminium leapt 4 percent to \$2,202 a tonne, a three-month high.

If the AWU and the company in Australia succeed in pushing through the cost-cutting EA, it will strengthen Alcoa's hand to impose similar attacks on jobs, wages and conditions domestically, and around the world, and will help set new exploitative benchmarks for the global industry.

Currently, the ABI smelter in Quebec, Canada, majority-owned by Alcoa, is attempting, with the assistance of the United Steelworkers union to force more than 1,000 workers to accept its demand for cuts to jobs and working conditions. The employees have been locked-out since January.

All the giant resources and mining companies, with the full support of the unions, justify their demands that workers accept sweeping cuts by arguing they are necessary to ensure "international competitiveness." The result is the pitting of workers against one another, and an endless race to the bottom.

Alcoa workers in Western Australia, who have demonstrated a determination to fight the company's offensive, should decisively reject the EA as a first step in developing a broad-based industrial and political campaign to defend all jobs and advance wages and working conditions.

Such a campaign can be developed only if workers break with the corporatised unions and establish new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. Such committees would fight to unify mining workers across Australia and turn out to other sections of workers in Canada, China, the US and internationally to begin the organisation of a counter-offensive against

the corporate and financial establishment.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective based on the fight for workers' governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing basic industry and the banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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