

Australian union officials use Newcastle rally to whitewash their betrayals

Terry Cook
6 November 2018

Around 700 people participated in a revealing Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) “Change the Rules” rally in the port city of Newcastle, north of Sydney, on October 30.

The largest contingents came from the construction and maritime industries, but the trade unions, which claim to have 66,000 members in the city and surrounding Hunter region, ensured that no work stoppages took place.

For years, the unions have suppressed any political or industrial struggle by workers facing cuts to jobs, wages and conditions and ensured continuous operations throughout Newcastle’s large coal port, regional mining operations and rail haulage industry.

Like the tens of thousands who attended similar protests in Melbourne and Sydney on October 23, workers were seeking to express their hostility to the decades-long corporate-government onslaught on workers’ rights and conditions.

The purpose of the “Change the Rules” campaign, however, is to channel these sentiments behind the election of another federal Labor government that will impose the dictates of the corporate elite with the help of the trade unions—just like the Hawke-Keating governments of 1983-96 and Rudd-Gillard governments of 2007-13.

In line with this aim, the speakers at the Newcastle rally did not mention the fact that the “rules” they claim to oppose—draconian Fair Work industrial laws—were introduced by the last Labor government in 2009 with the full support of the ACTU and its affiliates. Instead, they falsely referred to the laws “of the past six years” of the current Liberal-National government.

Ever since 2009, the unions, including those falsely presented as “militant,” such as the now-merged

Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), formerly the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), have invoked the legislation’s anti-strike provisions to suppress workers’ resistance and impose regressive enterprise agreements (EAs) in line with the employers’ demands.

Attempting to cover-up this record, the speakers portrayed a series of rotten sell-outs in recent disputes as “victories.”

Lorraine Cassin, national print division secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), hailed the EA brokered by her organisation to end a 16-month dispute at Unilever’s Streets ice cream plant in Sydney last November.

After the company locked out the Streets workers, the union exploited the Fair Work legislation to block any broader mobilisation of workers throughout the industry. Instead, it diverted opposition into a token consumer boycott of some of the company’s products.

Having isolated the workers, the union eventually pushed through an agreement containing a wage increase of just 5 percent over three years—below cost-of-living increases. The deal cleared the way for increased “workplace flexibility” to deliver the company substantial savings.

During the dispute, the union repeatedly stressed that it was willing to work with management to achieve \$2.5 million in annual cost-savings through roster changes, modifications in staffing levels to reflect demand and seasonal fluctuations, a training program to multi-skill the workforce and other attacks on conditions.

Cassin also described the deal struck by the AMWU and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) in a protracted dispute that erupted at Carlton and United Breweries

(CUB) in 2016 as a “great outcome.” The conflict was sparked when the company sacked 55 tradesmen at its Abbotsford plant in Melbourne, trying to force them to work for a labour-hire company on inferior wages and conditions.

For more than six months the unions invoked the Fair Work laws, which ban all solidarity strike action, to prevent broader industrial action in support of the locked-out CUB workers. All opposition was confined to an ineffectual “community picket” outside the plant, which allowed production to continue, and a token consumer boycott of the company’s products.

The unions closed down the CUB dispute after hatching a deal with the company that included “moderated wage outcomes” and “productivity and efficiency improvements,” including through greater workplace “flexibility” on rosters, overtime requests and rostered days off. The agreement also provided for job cuts.

As another example of the unions’ supposed struggle, Cassin referred to the dispute involving maintenance contractor UGL at the gas producer Esso Australia. At the beginning of 2017, the engineering and logistics firm sacked 200 workers in the Latrobe Valley region of Victoria, demanding that they accept employment under a new contract that slashed wages and conditions.

The maintenance unions ensured that no effective struggle was waged, despite widespread opposition from the workers and the local community, which has been blighted by mounting unemployment and poverty. Production was not disrupted, and a new maintenance workforce was hired on the inferior terms the company was demanding. The unions once again staged a “community protest” on the side of the plant’s entrance.

In a display of contempt for the UGL workers, many of whom remain unemployed, Cassin told the Newcastle gathering that while the protestors “were doing it tough,” they would stay on the protest line “as long as needed.” In reality, many of the sacked contractors have abandoned the “protest,” having been forced to find work elsewhere.

Other officials on the platform made similarly fraudulent claims. Grant Courtney, the Newcastle and Northern District secretary of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), falsified his organisation’s role in a dispute at JBS’s meat

processing plant in nearby Scone.

The union-brokered agreement provided for a pay increase of just 13.5 percent over three years, barely covering increases in the cost of living. It also enforced concessions upon the workers, including forcing them to work compulsory overtime 10 Saturdays in a year.

Cassin, Courtney and other officials declared that the federal Liberal-National government “needed to go.” They claimed that the unions would hold a Labor government “to account” and organise further demonstrations if it did not implement its pledges. In reality, Labor has said it will expand the role of the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business industrial tribunal, and retain all the anti-strike provisions.

The record demonstrates that the trade unions would collaborate, hand in glove, with such a government, as they have over the past 35 years, to intensify the onslaught on the jobs, conditions and wages of the workers they falsely claim to represent.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact