

Australia: Hutchison Ports workers begin work bans in Sydney and Brisbane

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Workers at Hutchison Ports' container terminals in Sydney and Brisbane are set to begin limited industrial action today, opposing demands by the global stevedoring company for sweeping wage cuts and a further erosion of working conditions in a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Indicating widespread anger, 98 percent of workers who voted in a union-organised ballot on Monday registered their support for industrial action. Workers will impose overtime and other work bans.

The Construction Forestry Mining Energy and Maritime Union (CFMMEU), which covers the sites, has not announced any strikes, even though the ballot indicated support for rolling stoppages.

Hutchison made an "exceptional circumstances" application to the Fair Work Commission for the notice period on the industrial action to be extended from three to five days. This would have prevented any work bans this week. The pro-business industrial tribunal, established by the previous federal Labor government with the support of the unions, rejected the application yesterday.

There are indications that the ruling class is counting on the CFMMEU to contain the port workers. Articles in the corporate press have pointed to fears that the dispute could become a focal point for broader struggles of the working class, amid stagnant or declining wages and soaring living costs.

On Monday, the *Australian* noted that the action at Hutchison coincided with a strike by 100 casual coal miners in Wollongong, an industrial city south of Sydney. It cited James Pearson, chief executive of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who warned of the CFMMEU "flexing its industrial muscle to hold up ports and shut down mines."

In reality, the CFMMEU and its constituent unions,

including the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), have functioned for decades as an industrial police force of governments and big business. The MUA cleared the way for Hutchison's latest sweeping attacks by enforcing hundreds of sackings throughout the stevedoring industry.

According to the union, Hutchison is demanding that workers accept pay cuts of up to 10 percent, followed by a wage freeze. Hourly rates could be reduced for workers at all wage levels, potentially costing some workers tens of thousands of dollars a year.

The company also wants cuts to parental leave and sick leave, a 2.5 percent reduction in superannuation payments and the abolition of full-time first aid positions.

Redundancy and long service leave payments would be slashed by half for most workers, the MUA has claimed. The union has stated that, taken together, these reductions would result in workers being up to 26 percent worse off in retirement.

The company's offensive is the latest stage in a cost-cutting offensive pursued by Hutchison since it began operations in Australia in 2013. There is intense competition in the globally-integrated and highly-automated stevedoring industry. Hutchison has previously posted substantial losses, including \$50 million in 2017.

As it has in previous disputes, the union is seeking to limit and isolate the conflict. It has signalled its willingness already to end the limited bans. MUA assistant national secretary Warren Smith told the *Australian Financial Review* on Wednesday that the union was "hopeful to remove the bans" if the company withdrew some claims.

The union is reprising the role it played during a 2015 dispute at Hutchison. After the company sacked 97

wharfies and maintenance staff by text messages, workers launched a seven-day stoppage in Sydney and Brisbane.

The MUA isolated the strike, preventing it from spreading to other stevedoring companies, including Asciano and DP World. It ended the stoppage and re-entered closed-door negotiations with company.

The union sought to confine opposition among workers to an impotent “community protest” outside the gates of Hutchison’s facilities, while production continued uninterrupted. In a bid to intimidate workers, MUA officials physically threatened Socialist Equality Party supporters who warned of the union’s preparations for a sell-out.

The MUA enforced an enterprise agreement that provided for 65 job cuts through “voluntary redundancies,” a two-hour extension of the working week aimed at slashing overtime and take-home pay, and the expanded use of casual labour. Hutchison issued a statement thanking the union for delivering “greatly enhanced flexibility.”

In 2015, Smith declared: “We can now move forward with Hutchison in a way that can underpin getting their business back on its feet.” MUA officials have similarly stated, during the current dispute, that they are anxious to ensure the financial viability of Hutchison’s operations.

The union’s primary concern, along with preventing any genuine struggle of workers, is to ensure its own position at the negotiating table, where it bargains away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent, while ensuring the privileges of the union officialdom.

Some of Hutchison’s latest demands, including for the removal of first aid officers and greater “flexibility” in workplace changes outside enterprise bargaining, threaten to undermine the union’s position.

The MUA’s falling membership, which compelled it to join the merged CFMMEU last year, reflects the fact that the union has enforced the destruction of most of the workforce it claims to protect.

The Waterside Workers Federation (WWF), the MUA’s predecessor, enforced the Hawke Labor government’s 1987–91 “Waterfront Industry Reform,” which eliminated 4,500 jobs.

One of the first actions of the MUA, formed through the amalgamation of the Seamens Union of Australia

and the WWF, was to contain the 1998 struggle by port workers against sweeping attacks by stevedoring company Patrick. After ending protracted industrial action, the union forced through a sell-out deal that led to the destruction of 1,400 port jobs and a major expansion in the use of casual labour. This established a precedent for further union-enforced attacks.

The MUA and the CFMMEU collaborate closely with Labor, one of the two main big business parties. Underscoring the fraudulent character of their claims to be waging a struggle at Hutchison, MUA officials have declared that the dispute could become a “poster child for Change the Rules.”

Change the Rules is a cynical union advertising campaign, aimed at channelling widespread discontent among workers behind the election of yet another federal Labor government, which would intensify the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions.

The record demonstrates that Hutchison workers can go forward only by breaking with the union and establishing new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These would be tasked with ending the isolation imposed by the unions and coordinating industrial and political action by all port and stevedoring workers, along with other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally.

Above all, what is required is a new, socialist perspective, aimed at establishing a workers’ government that would place the ports, shipping and other basic industries, along with the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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