Australia: Port Kembla Coal Terminal locks out workers

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Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT), located near Wollongong, an industrial city south of Sydney, began a seven-day lock-out of its entire permanent workforce on Saturday morning. The attack is part of a longstanding attempt by the company to impose sweeping cuts to wages and conditions.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), which covers the site, has done nothing to oppose the lock-out. It has limited the workers to an isolated picket at the front of the facility and has sought to prevent any broader mobilisation in their defence. During previous lock-outs at the site, union "pickets" have not prevented company operations from continuing with casual and contract labour.

PKCT ships coal mined in the Illawarra region to ports across the country and internationally. It is owned by major mining companies including PeaBody Energy, South32, Wollongong Coal, SIMEC mining, Centennial Coal and Glencore.

Management imposed the lock-out to prevent partial strikes that were slated to begin this week. The 51 permanent workers at the site were preparing to take one-hour on, one-hour off stoppages that the company claimed would jeopardise two weekend shipments worth $60 million.

The lock-out is part of a four-year dispute that began when the previous enterprise agreement (EA) expired in early 2015.

The company has threatened to shut the facility if workers do not accept "flexible" conditions in a new EA. PKCT has claimed that major mining companies are increasingly shipping coal through ports in Newcastle, an industrial city north of Sydney, because of cheaper costs. PKCT reported last year that coal loading volumes at the facility have declined by more than half over the past several years.

A leaked company document, published by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in March, 2018, revealed PKCT's plans to sack 30 percent of the permanent workforce and replace them with casual labour. To that end, the company has sought to remove any guarantees of job security from a new agreement.

Company representatives have also signalled plans for major wage reductions.

Executives have denounced the conditions contained in the previous deal as "utopian," complaining to the financial press that some of the workers receive an annual salary of $130,000, with 22 percent superannuation payments. PKCT's clear intention is to force the highly-skilled workers onto the poverty-level wages that are increasingly the norm throughout industry. Already, workers at the site have suffered an effective four-year wage freeze since the expiry of the 2015 deal.

The company first locked out the workforce in January, 2018. In April, it applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal industrial tribunal, for the termination of the 2015 agreement, on the grounds that the conditions it contained were "too generous" and could jeopardise the future of the terminal.

The FWC ruled in favour of PKCT's application, only delaying the termination of the last agreement until March, 2019.

If a new agreement is not signed by the deadline, workers will be forced onto the National Employment Standards, which sets the minimum wages and conditions for each industry. This would result in real pay cuts of up to 16 percent, along with the gutting of superannuation payments, leave provisions and other conditions.

PKCT has only been able to press ahead with its

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attacks as a result of the complicity of the CFMMEU.

The FWC, which terminated the 2015 deal, was established by the previous Labor government, with the full support of the unions. From the outset, its role has been to enforce the demands of the corporate and financial elite for sweeping wage cuts, a continuous offensive against conditions and the victimisation of workers who take industrial and political action.

The CFMMEU's main concern throughout the dispute has been PKCT's attempts to remove "consultation" clauses from a new agreement. The union is fearful that this will jeopardise its position at the "negotiating table," where it bargains away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent, in exchange for the privileges of the union officialdom.

At each point, the CFMMEU has sought to isolate the workers. It has refused to mobilise its thousands of members throughout the Illawarra region in their defence and has limited action by workers to isolated protests and stoppages aimed at causing as little disruption to PKCT's operations as possible.

The CFMMEU has also made plain that it is seeking to strike a sell-out deal with the company. In January, 2018, for instance, as PKCT was locking out its workers, Bob Timbs, the union's south western district vice president declared: "We are calling on the shareholders to intervene, to sit down with us and negotiate a fair and reasonable agreement." Such an agreement would inevitably contain major attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

The lockout of workers at PKCT coincides with a unanimous vote by workers at BlueScope's nearby Port Kembla steel plant for a fortnight of rolling stoppages beginning on Monday. It follows a strike by casual miners demanding job security at Wollongong Coal last week.

The unions have done everything they can to prevent workers involved in the disputes from developing a unified struggle. In each case, the company attacks have been directly prepared by decades of union sell-out deals and betrayals.

This underscores the need for a break with the unions and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file workplace committees.

Such committees would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the unions and coordinating joint industrial and political action by workers throughout the region and across the country. Above all, what is required is a new, socialist perspective aimed at establishing a workers' government that would place basic industry, along with the banks and finance institutions, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

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