

Australia: DP World stevedoring workers set to take industrial action

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Around 1,800 waterside workers at stevedoring company DP World Australia's (DPWA) container terminals in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Fremantle are set to begin a campaign of industrial action this Friday, endorsed in a union-organised ballot.

The industrial action proposed by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) includes a series of rolling bans on overtime, shift extensions, accepting late call-ins on advanced or delayed start times, and on employees working above normal grades. Strike action, if it occurs, would be restricted to one-hour stoppages in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Longer strikes, of up to 24 hours, may be held in Fremantle.

Facing deepening competition, DPWA is seeking to maximise its market share and profits by drastically slashing costs at the expense of its workforce.

In the bargaining process for a new enterprise agreement (EA), after the previous deal expired in February, the company has demanded that the MUA abandon its entire log of claims, including restrictions on the use of casual labour. It has also rejected calls for a 15 percent pay increase over three years. Instead, the company has offered just 2.6 percent annually, an amount that bears no relationship to the rapidly rising cost of living.

DPWA is also insisting that the workers accept the rollover of the previous regressive agreement brokered by the MUA, thereby ruling out any improvement in working conditions. Moreover, it has threatened it will not renew union-controlled income protection arrangements, which were included in the 2014 EA.

In a statement to employees, newly appointed DPWA chief executive Glen Hilton insisted that a 15 percent pay rise was "completely out of touch with the company's financial outlook."

"I will not support an EA outcome that continues to

disadvantage DP World's competitive position, when compared to Patrick's, Hutchison Ports and VICT," Hilton declared.

While DPWA is denying it has the capacity to provide any improvement in pay, and claims to be "struggling financially," it is part of the highly profitable global stevedoring group DP World, whose profit increased 10 percent last year to \$1.29 billion. Its revenue jumped to \$5.6 billion, from \$4.7 billion the year before.

A significant part of the revenue growth came from a number of acquisitions last year. These included Continental Warehousing Corporation (CWC) in India and Unifeeder and P&O Ferries in Europe. DP World is seeking to diversify into logistics and other areas of the supply chain, while reducing costs at its port operations.

DP World's group chairman and CEO Sultan Ahmed Bin Sulayem made clear that the attacks being carried out at the company were part of a planned assault on workers' conditions across its global operations. In recent comments to the media, he said the global company aimed "to integrate our new acquisitions and drive synergies across the portfolio with the objective of removing inefficiencies in global trade, improving the quality of our earnings and driving returns."

The MUA and its national secretary Paddy Crumlin have demagogically postured as opponents of DP World's attacks. At the same time, however, they have signalled their willingness to strike a sell-out agreement, as they have during every previous dispute.

Last month, Crumlin pointed to the union's role in imposing company demands in the 2014 EA, declaring "wages were restrained in the last round of negotiations setting DP World Australia up for massive profits."

The primary concern of the union, as always, is to

maintain its privileged position as an industrial police force and labour bargaining agency, negotiating away workers' jobs, wages and conditions for its own benefit. The MUA is particularly fearful that the abolition of the income protection scheme will deprive it of a lucrative stream of financial resources.

The real purpose of the union's current proposals for limited industrial action is to allow the rank and file to let of steam, while the union tops manoeuvre to reach an agreement in line with the company's demands.

A new round of negotiations was due to begin on March 26, but the management has refused to participate while industrial action or the threat of stoppages is underway. The union could well invoke this stand-off as justification for calling off the campaign, by declaring it to be necessary in order to bring the company back to the negotiating table. Such ruses have been used many, many times before, enabling the unions and major companies to shut down industrial action in the midst of disputes.

The MUA is already working to contain this current dispute within the restrictive confines of the draconian Fair Work (FW) industrial laws, which were introduced by the former Labor government in 2009, with the full support of the unions. It has enforced the order handed down last month by the pro-business Fair Work Commission, requiring the union to give an unprecedented five-day notice of intended industrial action. This is aimed at ensuring that any bans or stoppages have minimum impact on DPWA's operations.

At the same time, the union is utilising the country's FW laws to prevent any unified struggle by workers at DPWA with their colleagues at Hutchison Ports' container terminals in Sydney and Brisbane, who are also currently in dispute over a new work agreement. Nor has the MUA called for workers at rival companies, such as Patrick, to take any supportive industrial action.

The destruction of conditions, intensification of labour processes and growing casualisation across Australian ports are the direct outcome of a decades-long collaboration between the unions and the stevedoring and shipping companies over the past three decades.

More than three decades ago, 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. And one betrayal after another followed it. The MUA, formed through the amalgamation of the WWF and the Seamen's Union of Australia in 1993, sold out the 1998 struggle of port workers against sweeping attacks by the Patrick stevedoring company, resulting in the destruction of another 1,400 port jobs and a major expansion in the use of casual labour. This then became the basis for further union enforced attacks across the waterfront, and for the ever growing levels of casualisation that are now endemic in the industry.

The record demonstrates that workers at DPWA and Hutchison Ports can go forward only by breaking with the union and establishing new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These committees would act to end union-imposed isolation and to organise coordinated industrial and political action by all port and stevedoring workers, along with other sections of the working class in Australia and internationally.

Above all, workers need a new—socialist—perspective, aimed at establishing a workers' government that would place the ports, shipping and other basic industries, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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