

Hostility to workers' questions at online Australian union event

Mike Head
23 April 2020

It was billed as “an online meeting for Union members across the country” to discuss the trade unions’ response to the COVID-19 crisis. But Wednesday night’s event produced a picture of the collapse of support for the unions, and their vicious reaction to workers who ask even basic questions about their close cooperation with governments and employers.

Workers had received emails from unions, urging them to join the “meeting,” to be addressed by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary Sally McManus. Even according to the ACTU organisers, only about 3,000 people participated, out of the unions’ claimed membership of 1.8 million.

It soon became apparent, from the greetings posted by participants at the beginning, that the overwhelming majority were union officials or delegates loyal to the officials. In the chat comments, some posed as ordinary workers but turned out to be senior union bureaucrats.

The advertised focus of the event was the Liberal-National Coalition government’s Fair Work Act regulation, proclaimed last Friday, to permit employers to give just one day’s notice before pushing through workplace ballots to cut workers’ pay and conditions.

“At the meeting, members and activists will develop a plan to put pressure on local employers and politicians to protect our EBAs [enterprise bargaining agreements],” the invitation emails stated.

That invitation was hardly likely to attract rank-and-file workers, who have suffered years of bitter experiences with the unions signing EBAs with employers that erode basic conditions and then ban them from taking industrial action.

The event, however, was not a meeting at all. It was a “webinar” in which no workers could speak, let alone oppose the unions’ role in already assisting the employers to slash the pay and conditions of millions of workers over the past three weeks.

McManus spoke for less than 10 minutes, offering no perspective except to appeal for protest actions to try and stop employers using the new regulation instead of

consulting with the unions, and to launch a competition to sign up new union members.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters, members of several unions, used the chat box to ask a series of questions, starting with: “Why can’t workers speak at this meeting?” and “Why can’t we move alternative resolutions at this meeting?”

When these questions were ignored, further questions were asked, pointing to the intimate partnership between Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government and the ACTU in drafting the government’s JobKeeper \$750-a-week wage subsidy scheme.

As well as being a massive \$130 billion bailout for big business, with no guarantee that a single job would be saved under conditions of mass unemployment, the central purpose of the accompanying amendments to the Fair Work Act—agreed by the ACTU—was to allow employers to cut wages and scrap core working conditions, supposedly for six months.

The questions posted by the SEP supporters and directed to McManus, included, “Why does [Attorney General and Industrial Relations Minister] Christian Porter refer to you as his ‘BFF,’ that is Best Friend Forever?” and “Why did Morrison phone you to thank you for your cooperation with his government and then publicly praise you?”

Other questions asked about the role of McManus and the unions in collaborating with the employers to push through industrial award cuts to pay and conditions, including penalty wage rates, for about two million hospitality, restaurant and office workers in just one week, without any consultation with workers.

“Why did you declare on [ABC-TV’s] ‘Insiders’ two weeks ago that the unions had told the employers they can get everything they want by co-operation with the unions?” and “Why did you boast on ‘Insiders’ that the unions had already scrapped a whole series of conditions for hospitality and clerical workers within a week?” (see: Australian unions tell employers: “You can get everything you want”).

Another question pointed to the fact that the ACTU was

the main architect of the JobKeeper legislation: “Don’t the JobKeeper laws themselves give the employers the green light to scrap basic conditions, such as penalty rates?”

A further question asked: “Isn’t this regulation-making power something that all the unions agreed to when they drafted the Fair Work Act?” It pointed to the fact that the Rudd-Gillard Labor government introduced the Act in 2009 in partnership with the unions, specifically to entrench their role in enforcing the anti-strike laws.

The ACTU’s only concern is that the latest Fair Work Act regulation changes could by-pass the role of the unions in policing the attacks on wages and conditions, as they have done since the prices and incomes Accords between the ACTU, employers and the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

“Aren’t the unions just seeking to be consulted before attacks are imposed on workers, so that they can help block resistance, as the unions have done ever since the Accords?” an SEP supporter asked. “Hasn’t union membership plunged over the past three decades because of all the sellouts they have inflicted since the Hawke and Keating Accords?” (see: “COVID-19 and the role of Labor and the unions in Australia”).

None of these questions were answered. Instead, they provoked physically threatening responses from union officials. Among them were comments such as “Do you want a fat lip?” and references to “ice picks” of the sort used by a Stalinist agent to assassinate Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940. Other abuse referred to SEP supporters as “trolls” and members of a “weird sect.”

These threats of violence, while especially sinister in invoking the heritage of the Stalinist slanders and death squads directed against the Trotskyist movement, typify the methods used by the unions to intimidate and suppress opposition by workers to their betrayals.

The same kind of anti-democratic suppression of dissent, backed by crude denunciations, has been seen in recent weeks as hundreds of workers across the country took to social media to condemn the construction union for enforcing continued production in the sector, despite the health risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) responded with censorship, mass deleting Facebook comments. Supporters of the union bureaucracy also vilified workers critical of the CFMMEU and downplayed the dangers of COVID-19, demonstrating their contempt for workers’ health and safety.

Such methods are not new. They were displayed during the unions’ enforcement of their Accords with Hawke and Keating. Workplace shop committees and other rank-and-file organisations that resisted the Labor government-ACTU

pro-market “economic restructuring” were ruthlessly broken up.

As recorded in Part 3 of the WSWs series *Industrial relations and the trade unions under Labor: From Whitlam to Rudd*: “Delegates in the metal trade unions, who continued to believe they were elected to defend the members who had voted for them, were victimised by the union apparatus and summarily removed. In the building industry, where on-the-job organisation was required to meet the changing and often dangerous character of the work, workers’ safety committees were disbanded.”

These unions are no longer working-class organisations. The Accords of Hawke and Keating marked their transformation, like their counterparts worldwide, into apparatuses that work to reverse the past gains of the working class in order to help make “their” national capitalist economy “competitive” on the world market.

The Australian capitalist class, however, demand that what is left of workers’ conditions and pay rates is further gutted. The crisis of the COVID19 pandemic is being used as the means to carry out a wholesale destruction of working-class rights that the ACTU and Labor have made clear they will collaborate and cooperate to impose.

Wednesday night’s event showed that this union bureaucracy is now desperately fearful of losing its grip over the mounting unrest among workers over mass unemployment, unsafe working conditions in the COVID-19 pandemic, the government-employer push for premature returns to work, and the offensive underway against pay and basic conditions.

In order to defend their lives, livelihoods and futures, workers and youth will have to form new rank-and-file organisations to wage a political struggle against the union apparatus and its associated Labor Party machine. Rather than being tied to the profit requirements of the capitalist class by the unions, the working class must take power out of the hands of the financial elite and reorganise society to meet the pressing needs of the overwhelming majority, not the wealthy few. For that they need a revolutionary socialist party. That is the perspective advanced by the SEP.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact