Australian maritime union moving to impose a sell-out deal at Patrick Terminals

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is continuing limited industrial action at Patrick Terminals' container handling facilities in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Fremantle while working behind the scenes to broker a new national enterprise agreement (EA) that meets company demands for costs to be slashed.

The previous EA expired on June 30, 2020 and closed-door negotiations between Patrick and the MUA have been ongoing since around February last year. Workers, angered by the lack of progress in negotiations and constant company provocations, have voted repeatedly for industrial action, but the union has ensured minimal disruption to the company's operations.

In October last year, the MUA offered Patrick a "peace deal," which would have extended the existing agreement for two years, preventing any further industrial action in that period, in exchange for a "reasonable and affordable" 2.5 percent annual pay rise, less than half the union's initial demand for 6 percent.

In other words, the MUA offered to impose a miserly pay increase that in no way keeps pace with the rapidly escalating cost of living, in line with the unions' decades-long role imposing wage stagnation and reducing conditions.

Although the offer was rejected by the company, the MUA nevertheless agreed to pause industrial action until the end of 2020 ahead of a Fair Work Commission (FWC) hearing on an application by Patrick for the termination of all industrial action.

In fact, the MUA prevented any further action until May this year, when the current round of sporadic short stoppages and limited work bans began. This union-enforced stay enabled Patrick to clear a backlog of container cargo resulting from last year's industrial action, strengthening the company's hand against workers in the dispute.

Patrick declared last month that it had "reached agreement with local MUA representatives in Brisbane and Melbourne, however, Sydney and Fremantle deals are yet to be agreed to by the MUA."

Based on scant details of the proposed agreement released by the company, the agreement currently on the table appears to be in line with the so-called "peace deal" offered last October.

The MUA will herald any agreement by Patrick to roll over existing conditions as a victory. In reality, a rollover will simply mean that the new agreement does nothing to improve workers' conditions, while locking them in to four years of sub-inflationary pay increases.

Already this year, the MUA has brokered regressive EAs featuring paltry pay outcomes at a series of major stevedoring companies including DP World, Hutchison Ports and Victoria International Container Terminal, where it agreed to a ten-year ban on "illegal" industrial action.

At Hutchison Ports, the agreement brokered by the MUA in June covering 400 workers at the company's Sydney and Brisbane terminals provides for a 10 percent pay increase over four years. This miserable increase has already been more than offset by past cost cutting enforced by the MUA, including the destruction in 2015 of 97 jobs across the company's Sydney and Brisbane terminals, an extension of the official working week and increased use of casual labour.

The Hutchison agreement also includes a clause allowing the union "to provide alternatives" to redundancies in the event of an economic downturn. In other words, the MUA will not defend jobs but will find savings at workers' expense to offset any loss of company profits. Moreover, the agreement does not abolish the use of casual labour by the company but only establishes a cap on further casualisation.

A provision in the agreement most praised by the MUA is the arrangement on hiring which, according to the union, means that "recruitment will no longer be left to managerial prerogative." Under the deal, "around 40 percent of new hires will be sourced from families and friends of employees, 30 percent through names offered by the union and the remaining 30 percent determined by management."

In the past workers regularly challenged "managerial prerogative" by taking industrial action to prevent the blacklisting and victimisation of militant workers. The hiring arrangement at Hutchison has nothing to do with democratic workers' control over hiring, but is a means by which the union, in collaboration with management, can weed out workers who oppose further restructuring while awarding jobs to those who are close to the union bureaucracy.

The attacks on workers' wages and conditions enshrined in the current raft of union-brokered EAs across the waterfront are a continuation of decades of restructuring enforced by the maritime unions. The unions, acting as an arm of management, have enforced the destruction of thousands of full-time jobs.

Under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments' "waterfront reform program," the unions collaborated with employers to impose sweeping restructuring across the country's ports from 1987 to 1991, halving full-time employment in the sector from 8,300 to 3,800.

The MUA betrayed the seminal Patrick waterfront strike in 1998, ratifying the elimination of another 650 waterfront jobs—almost half the stevedore's workforce—allowing greater use of casuals and establishing the framework for more than two decades of attacks on workers across the waterfront.

Patrick workers should draw the lessons from this record of betrayal. For the struggle to defend and improve conditions to go forward, the present dispute cannot be left in the hands of the MUA. Workers must fight for the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee to organise a genuine industrial and political struggle as part of establishing a counter-offensive to company-union attacks across the entire waterfront.

This needs to be based on a socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the profit system and aims for the establishment of a workers' government that will place the ports, shipping and other basic industries, along with the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.