

Australian maritime union continues to isolate locked-out Qube workers

Steve Streitberg, Terry Cook
3 October 2021

Stevedoring company Qube Ports is stepping up a vicious campaign against workers at its terminals in the Port of Fremantle and Kwinana in Western Australia who are fighting for improved working conditions in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EA).

Qube Ports is a multi-billion dollar stevedoring and freight handling company with facilities at 29 ports across Australia, including in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Fremantle, as well as in smaller key regional centres. Its subsidiaries include P&O Automotive and General Stevedoring, Northern Stevedoring Services and Australian Amalgamated Terminals.

The 121 workers at the company's WA terminals were locked out in early August, almost immediately after they began a campaign of limited industrial action that included sporadic four-hour stoppages, a series of work bans and a 24-hour halt to unloading ships newly arrived in port.

Workers voted unanimously for the campaign in April, after Qube rejected all 42 claims tabled by the Maritime Union of Australia's (MUA) WA branch. The company has insisted throughout 15 months of negotiations that present working conditions be maintained and rolled over into the new EA. The company is offering a paltry 2.5 percent pay increase that is well below the recently announced CPI increase of 3.8 percent over the twelve months to June 2021.

Under the old union-brokered EA the workers, including permanents, have no fixed rosters and are only informed by text message at 4 p.m. on the day prior if they have to work the following day and on which shift. Workers are continually required to work consecutive runs of excessive hours, resulting in fatigue issues that impact on safety.

Among the changes rejected by the company was an extra two-hour lead time for notification of shifts to allow workers some leeway to organise family and life activities. When, as part of the industrial action, workers began refusing to report for duty unless management allocated work schedules by 2 pm the day before, the company responded with a lockout.

Since the lockout, the company has mobilised managerial staff in a scabbing operation to carry out work at the WA

terminals. This is not the first time Qube had used such aggressive tactics. In April 2018 it flew in scabs by helicopter during an industrial dispute at its Webb Dock West terminal in the Port of Melbourne.

Earlier this month, the company launched yet another provocation in a further attempt to intimidate the Qube workers and force them to accept its dictates by blaming them for the possibility of redundancies at the company's other terminals, supposedly as a consequence of their dispute.

On September 13, the MUA reported it had been informed by Qube that global shipping line Wallenius Wilhelmsen, the company's largest client, was considering cancelling its contract and moving its business to rival operator Linx due to concerns over the impact of the dispute. The company's response to this news was to threaten sackings at its Brisbane, Melbourne and Port Kembla ports. While the MUA press release claimed Qube had "outlined to the MUA the numbers of jobs to be made redundant," the union did not report the figure.

Since the lockout, MUA officials have made a series of public statements claiming the union has been organising widespread support for the Qube workers. MUA national president Christy Cain proclaimed in August, "we (unions) are united across Australia in this struggle."

Such assertions are nothing but empty posturing. In reality, the MUA has not organised a single day of solidarity industrial action by any of its 16,000 members across the Australian waterfront to back the Qube workers, even at the company's other terminals around the country.

Moreover, the MUA has not lifted a finger to prevent Qube's scabbing operation at the WA terminals. To hose down any concern that the operation may have sparked among its members, the union has issued bulletins playing down the seriousness of this dirty operation on the grounds that the scab force is taking longer to discharge cargo than the regular workers.

At the same time, the MUA has swiftly wrapped up a raft of EA disputes at other stevedoring companies to prevent the

possibility of any unified action by port workers. Even as Qube was escalating its attacks on the WA workers, the MUA hurriedly called off all industrial action in a dispute at the Fremantle Port Authority (FPA) claiming there had been “a bit of movement” in “high level” negotiations.

While the MUA has touted support for the locked out workers from other unions in Australia and overseas, this amounts to nothing more than a few donations and puerile protests that have no impact whatsoever on Qube’s operations.

The Maritime Union of New Zealand announced it was sending a donation and its national secretary, Craig Harrison, declared the union would deliver a letter of protest to the captain of the Thermopylae, a Wallenius Wilhelmsen ship, when it docked in Auckland.

Qube claimed earlier last month that the union had been contacting Qube clients and threatening them with black bans if they continued to give work to the stevedoring company. Demonstrating that the very suggestion of international action against Qube was anathema to the MUA, the union rushed to dismiss the claim as “garbage,” declaring that such action would be “working against our own interests.”

The MUA is employing the same tactics it has used in dispute after dispute. Behind the inane slogan “our members will go one day longer and one day stronger than Qube,” the MUA is isolating the locked-out workers and leaving them to face the well-resourced logistics giant on their own.

The MUA’s aim is to wear down the Qube workers’ resolve to clear the way for a return to the negotiating table to stitch up a deal in line with the company’s requirements. The MUA has already accepted the company’s miserable pay offer, with MUA WA branch secretary Will Tracey stating, “the dispute with Qube, incredibly, is not about wages.”

As in every dispute, the MUA’s concern is not that the company is insisting on the retention of onerous working conditions. These conditions were in fact the outcome of work agreements negotiated by the union itself and pushed through onto its membership.

In 2015, the MUA allowed the elimination of seven-weeks-on, one-week-off rosters at Qube, selling to its members the company’s worthless guarantees that it would revert to the former schedule when “trading conditions improved.”

The framework for the protracted assault on dock workers’ conditions was laid by the MUA’s betrayal of the seminal Patrick waterfront strike in 1998, when the union ratified the elimination of 650 waterfront jobs—almost half the stevedore’s workforce—the ever-greater use of casuals and the continuous tearing up of working conditions.

The union’s main preoccupation in the present dispute, as

in the past, is not the welfare of the Qube workers. Its overriding concern is maintaining its position as an industrial policeman to suppress worker opposition to management and as a labour bargaining agency to deliver company demands. These joint roles are the source of the privileged position and lifestyles of the union officialdom.

In every dispute, the MUA has ruthlessly enforced the provisions of the draconian Fair Work laws, introduced in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government with the support of the union, which prohibit virtually all strike action except during EA bargaining and make any form of solidarity action illegal.

Workers must draw the lessons from this record of betrayal. For the struggle to defend and improve conditions to go forward at Qube, the fate of workers cannot be left in the hands of the MUA.

Workers must fight for the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee to reach out to port workers and other sections of the working class 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.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact