

Maritime Union of Australia rushes to end industrial action at Qube Ports before government intervention

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On Friday the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) abruptly suspended a protracted struggle by its members at Qube Ports in Fremantle, Western Australia (WA), forcing them back to work under conditions dictated by the company.

This blatant sell-out comes within weeks of the MUA calling off a month of industrial action by Patrick Terminals workers at the Port of Melbourne and the sudden ending by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) of industrial action by truck drivers at Toll.

According to a report in the *West Australian*, more than 50 percent of Qube workers allocated to work the first shift back called in sick, indicating that there is substantial disagreement with the union's decision to end the industrial action.

The 121 Qube workers had been locked out by the company since early August after they began a campaign of limited industrial action over a new enterprise agreement.

The MUA rushed to shut down the struggle after Michaelia Cash, attorney-general in the federal Liberal-National government, announced that she would ask the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to terminate all industrial action at Qube and impose compulsory arbitration.

Cash claimed the dispute was “causing financial harm to the Western Australian economy” and “damaging the reputation of Fremantle Port.” Even after the MUA ended the industrial action, Cash made clear that the government would closely monitor developments in the FWC, declaring it critical “that the dispute come to an end.”

Cash's intervention came at the request of the WA Labor government, demonstrating the shared hostility

of both major parties to the working class. WA Ports Minister Rita Saffioti had previously appealed to the FWC to shut down the industrial action on the grounds that it was “causing substantial delays in unloading vessels at Fremantle Port, and consequently resulting in significant disruption to the WA economy.”

Far from opposing this intervention by the government, the MUA responded by making an application for the dispute to be arbitrated by the FWC, placing the workers' fate in the hands of the pro-business industrial tribunal.

The FWC is tasked with enforcing the draconian provisions of the Fair Work Act, introduced in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government with the full support of the unions.

These industrial laws prohibit all industrial action, except during designated “bargaining periods” for new enterprise agreements at individual workplaces, while at the same time legally protecting employers, such as Qube, who impose lockouts.

They also provide the FWC with extensive powers to ban or terminate industrial action on a raft of pretexts including the possibility of “significant economic harm to the employer” or “significant damage to the Australian economy or part of it.”

Among workers' demands was the requirement that Qube notify permanent employees by 2 p.m. what shift they would be assigned to on the following day, instead of at 4 p.m., as is currently the case. The small change would allow some scope for workers to organise family and life activities.

This claim, along with a number of other changes designed to avoid fatigue issues that impact on job safety, has been repeatedly rejected by the company

throughout 15 months of negotiations. Qube insists the onerous existing work arrangements, including the absence of any fixed rosters, are necessary to cope with fluctuations in ship arrivals.

The MUA has already accepted the company's pay offer of a meagre 2.5 percent, well below the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent. At this stage, the company has not agreed to backdate this to July 2020, when the previous enterprise agreement expired.

Throughout the protracted dispute the MUA has done everything possible to isolate and wear down the Qube workers. When the company began using managerial staff as a scab force at the Fremantle terminals, the MUA made no attempt to prevent it. Moreover, it has allowed the unloading by union labour of cargos diverted by Qube to ports in Melbourne.

Even so, Qube director Michael Sousa could not contain his annoyance that the MUA had failed to rapidly suppress the workers' opposition. Publicly admonishing the union, Sousa declared the latest development a "humiliating back-down for the MUA officials in WA."

Sousa gloated: "They (the workers) have returned to work with nothing. They are under exactly the same conditions they have worked for more than 20 years ... the same arrangements as the MUA national office accepted and have been agreed at 25 ports around Australia." He demanded the MUA "apologise to the people of WA and their own members for leading this pointless strike."

The WA government's appeal to the Morrison government was made amid a clamour of business organisations denouncing the workers' campaign and demanding government action to end it.

WA Pastoralists and Graziers Association president Tony Seabrook, who has repeatedly argued for the lowering of wages in the agriculture sector, claimed that the dispute had caused a two-week hold up in delivering harvesters and said this was threatening a "bumper harvest." Seabrook branded the workers' fight for improved conditions as "short sighted and petty."

Dale Alcock, president of the ABN Group, the state's largest residential constructor, threatened that the shortage of bricklaying supplies caused by the dispute could see building companies resort to lay-offs. This corporate representative, with a personal net worth of

\$280 million, declared it was "ridiculous that it (the dispute) has been allowed to go on for 11 weeks."

The corporate and government onslaught is intended as a warning to workers across the waterfront and the whole logistics sector that they must submit without question to the employers' never-ending cost-cutting agenda.

Waterfront workers must act now and launch a campaign of political and industrial action behind the Qube workers, as part of a counter-offensive against the decades-long employer-union assault on workers' jobs, conditions and basic rights.

One thing has become absolutely clear in the course of the Qube dispute: It is logistics workers—not the highly paid company executives and useless boardroom inhabitants—who are indispensable to maintaining vital supply chains. The hysterical denunciations of recent strikes by government, business and the corporate press demonstrate the strategic importance of Australia's ports and roads. As such these workers are in an extremely powerful position to advance a fight for their interests.

To carry out such a fight, workers must turn to the construction of new organisations of struggle, totally independent of the corporatised trade unions. This includes the establishment of rank-and-file committees at every work site across the waterfront and the entire logistics sector and beyond.

Above all else, such a workers' counter offensive 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, the logistics sector and other basic essential industries, along with the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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