

Australian prime minister hectors port workers over limited strikes

Martin Scott

7 December 2021

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week assured business lobbyists the federal government was ready to intervene if further strikes are called by Patrick Terminals workers.

Addressing the Australian Industry Group (Ai Group) on November 30, Morrison said: “We encourage the parties to this dispute to negotiate in good faith to resolve their issues. At the same time, I can assure you that the government will take action, if needed, to protect the Australian economy from serious harm.”

Morrison’s comments have been presented as an attack on the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which covers the ports. The union, however, has already agreed to a pitiful 2.5 percent annual wage increase, well below the current CPI, and has prevented any sustained industrial action that would threaten the operations of the multi-billion dollar shipping, ports and logistics sector.

The real target of Morrison’s comments was the mounting anger within the working-class, which the ruling elite fears will find increasing expression, including through escalating strikes. The MUA, which has enforced massive job destruction for more than two decades, and suppressed any struggle against this continuous restructuring, shares the same concern. This is why it has isolated a series of recent waterfront disputes and signed multiple sell-out deals ending limited industrial action.

It is notable that Morrison, while hectoring port workers and threatening government intervention against them, explicitly appealed to the union to collaborate with management to resolve the dispute.

The union issued a statement denouncing Morrison. But it immediately pledged to carry out his main demand. Asked on Channel 7’s *Sunrise* television programme on Thursday whether there would be more strikes before Christmas, MUA National Secretary Paddy Crumlin replied: “No, of course not.” This is a pitch to the ruling elite that the unions can be relied on to suppress the growing opposition among workers.

It is just the latest demonstration that, as an integral component of the capitalist establishment, the fundamental task of the MUA, and every other union, is to serve as an industrial police force. By calling isolated and limited strikes when workers’ unrest demands it, then seizing upon any pretext that

arises to call them off, the union fraudulently seeks to posture as a militant opponent of management.

Early last month, the MUA suspended all industrial action against Patrick until December 10, after the stevedore asked the FWC to step in and terminate the action. In October, the union shut down planned stoppages in Melbourne in order to limit disruption after a COVID-19 outbreak forced hundreds of workers at Patrick and other stevedores at the port to isolate.

In October 2020, when the company sought the intervention of the FWC for the first time in this dispute, the union proposed a “peace deal” comprising a two-year ban on strikes, a 2.5 percent pay “rise” and the retention of existing EA conditions. Although the company did not agree to this deal, the MUA called off the planned strikes and did not carry out any further industrial action at Patrick ports until May this year.

This has allowed the company to escalate its offensive. Patrick has applied to the FWC for the existing EA to be terminated. In addition to slashing wages by more than 50 percent, this would allow it to do away with multi-week rosters, potentially moving to a Qube-like system where workers are notified of shift times at 4 p.m. on the preceding day.

While the corporate press has responded hysterically to strikes and work bans carried out in recent months across the country’s ports, the reality is that this industrial action has had minimal impact on the profits of Patrick or other stevedores.

In the year ending June 2021, Patrick brought in \$679.5 million in revenue, 8.8 percent more than the previous year, and \$25.6 million in profits. Its parent company, Qube Holdings, saw a 14.1 percent year-over-year profit increase to \$182.9 million.

Clearly referring to the waterfront dispute of 1998, Morrison said Liberal-National governments “have always been prepared to take action to ensure our ports can serve our economy as best as they possibly can.” In fact, in that seminal dispute, it was the MUA’s collaboration with the Howard government that proved to be the turning point, resulting in the sacking of almost half the workforce, and setting the stage for decades of attacks on jobs and conditions on the waterfront and throughout the working class.

Morrison’s statement is in line with growing calls from the ruling elite for sweeping changes to industrial relations law,

with a particular focus on the enterprise bargaining system.

Last month, Ai Group CEO Innes Willox called for the creation of an industry code to limit what could be contained in enterprise agreements in the maritime and ports industry.

Willox's demands for industrial relations reform extended beyond the ports to a broader agenda to reshape Australia's enterprise bargaining system into one "that drives productivity improvement at the enterprise level."

Willox said, "enterprise agreements should not be able to affect the supply or acquisition of goods or services by a business, including in relation to recruiting employees, using labour hire and outsourcing work."

In other words, workers should not be able to demand a written commitment from their employer to anything beyond their own pay and basic conditions. Under Australia's draconian industrial relations laws, which prevent strikes other than during enterprise bargaining, this would effectively prevent workers from fighting against the erosion of permanent jobs.

Labor and the unions have also flagged that changes to the Fair Work Act are on the agenda in the lead-up to next year's federal election.

Australian Council of Trade Unions Secretary Sally McManus said last week: "Our current system was designed in the last century and is no longer fit for purpose or delivering the results that Australia needs."

The reality is, the current system was designed by Labor and the unions, and the purpose it has served up to this point has been to facilitate the wholesale slashing of jobs, pay and conditions and prevent the development of a mass movement of the working class against the assault.

Now, the unions are concerned that the proliferation of casual, labour-hire and gig-economy jobs they have allowed through previous EAs threatens to cut them out of the bargaining process entirely. The unions see industry-wide bargaining, in which they are granted automatic coverage over entire sectors where they don't already have a presence, as an opportunity to reverse this decline.

The ACTU sought to use the pandemic to establish a blueprint for such an arrangement. When the COVID crisis began, McManus entered into daily talks with Morrison's then industrial relations minister Christian Porter and big business representatives. In the space of weeks, they suspended or altered awards covering millions of workers, allowing employers to respond with "flexibility" to the pandemic, including by altering working hours and slashing overtime payments. All of this was done without a single meeting of the affected workers, much less a vote on these sweeping changes to their conditions.

At the time, McManus told employers they could "get everything you want" by collaborating with the unions. Porter described her as his "new BFF [best friend forever]."

What the unions are aiming for was also indicated on Sunday

by Labor leader Anthony Albanese, when he outlined his vision for "a government that backs Australian industry," and a country in which "unions and business work together."

Recent strikes across Australia's ports and trucking industry reflect profound anger among the working class, mounting for decades but sharply accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers have been forced to risk serious illness and death at the same time as union-enforced wage freezes and the mass destruction of secure jobs.

One sell-out deal after another has been rammed through by the MUA, the Transport Workers Union (TWU), and every other Australian union. While the unions have declared these disputes over, the key issues for workers have not been resolved. At best, companies have agreed to pay "increases" that will barely keep up with inflation, and mealy-mouthed promises that labour hire and contracting will not be increased beyond caps that enshrine current practices.

Australian workers should harbour no illusions. The enterprise bargaining system, established by the Keating Labor government, is utterly hostile to the working class. Its purpose is to divide workers and suppress industrial action. But it cannot be "fixed" through reforms proposed by Labor and the unions, the very forces which designed the Fair Work system as a tool of class suppression, and who now intend to sharpen it.

Instead, workers must fight Fair Work, and the moves by big business, the Coalition, Labor and the unions to construct an even more draconian regime, on the basis of advancing their own independent class interests.

This means a break with Labor and the unions, and a fight to build a socialist movement in the working class, beginning with rank-and-file committees in every workplace, to take up a struggle for a workers' government.

Under this socialist perspective, ports and trucking companies, along with banks and other big businesses, must be placed under democratic workers' ownership and control, and operated to serve social need, rather than corporate profits.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact