

Maritime Union of Australia deal to sell out Patrick Terminals workers

Martin Scott
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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) yesterday announced it had reached an “in-principle agreement” with Patrick Terminals, which Patrick workers should reject.

The “11th-hour” union-management deal was brokered ahead of a Fair Work Commission (FWC) hearing on Patrick’s bid to terminate the existing enterprise agreement (EA) covering the company’s more than 1,000 workers in the ports of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Fremantle.

Underscoring the concessionary character of the proposed agreement, the MUA declared it had “brokered peace with Patrick Terminals’ management,” ending a two-year dispute.

The union made its orientation clear, stating it “has always sought to work cooperatively with Patrick Terminals’ management on continuous business improvement to ensure job security, safety, and productivity at Patrick Terminals’ four ports.”

The proposed four-year deal contains a pay increase of 4 percent this year and then 2.5 percent or the consumer price index (CPI) increase, if higher, in each of the next three years. This amounts to a pay cut in real terms.

The official CPI is a vast underestimation of the rapidly rising cost of living. In the 12 months to December 2021, the CPI rose 3.5 percent, while the price of non-discretionary goods and services, including food, fuel, housing, utilities, school fees and health care, went up by 4.5 percent.

MUA assistant national secretary Jamie Newlyn said the pay increases were “above industry standard.” That only highlights the role the union has played for decades in enshrining a continuous assault on pay and conditions as the “industry standard” in enterprise agreements.

Patrick workers have not received a pay rise since 2019 as a result of the protracted negotiations. The union has repeatedly called off planned industrial action, ensuring minimal disruption to profits.

In “exchange” for wage increases only marginally higher than those rejected by workers in December, the proposed deal would give the company total control over hiring and firing, removing a requirement in the existing EA for union approval of changes to the composition of the workforce. The union also dropped its demand for a “family and friends” hiring policy at Patrick’s Port Botany facility in Sydney.

In announcing the deal, the MUA criticised the “lies and opportunism” of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who “sought to insert himself into the legitimate bargaining process.”

In fact, when Morrison assured business lobbyists late last year the federal government was ready to intervene if further strikes were called, MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin quickly obliged. He replied, “No, of course not,” when asked on television whether any more industrial action was planned before Christmas.

In response to Patrick’s renewed threat last month to terminate the EA, the union called no industrial action, but instead issued a plea to Morrison “to ensure that the company does not move ahead with this court action.”

In unison with the MUA, the company welcomed the four-year deal, which a spokesperson said would deliver “much-needed flexibilities for the Patrick operations.”

In other words, the proposed deal will deliver Patrick exactly what it demands—a workforce at the company’s beck and call, whose personal lives must be subordinated to the vagaries of international supply chains.

The spokesperson continued: “Patrick Terminals

looks forward to the endorsement of the agreement by the MUA members and four years of stability on the waterfront.”

“Stability” is the key word here. What Patrick, the MUA, and the entire ruling elite fear most is that the unions will no longer be able to suppress mounting anger in the working class, motivated by decades of attacks and sellouts and sharply accelerated by the global pandemic.

This was demonstrated by an article last month in the *Australian Financial Review*, the mouthpiece of Australian finance capital, warning that “the left-wing leadership of the ACTU” was “facing criticism from the further left.”

The article stated: “In accusing the MUA of a blatant sell-out in a recent waterfront dispute, the World Socialist Website said workers must maximise their current leverage and fight for their interests by 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.’”

The MUA will attempt to ram through the Patrick deal by convincing workers that the only alternative is a reversion to the industrial award, which would slash wages by more than 50 percent.

The fact that the union has for two years been unable to corral Patrick workers into accepting the demands of management is a sign of mounting opposition among workers.

This has forced the union to rely upon the FWC and the threat of EA termination as a gun to the head of workers in order to try to ram through the crooked deal and prove its worth to management and the corporate elite as an industrial police force.

The FWC industrial court, the draconian industrial laws it enforces, and the entire anti-worker enterprise bargaining system were all introduced by Labor governments, with the full support, then and since, of the trade unions.

Similar threats of EA termination are being employed at Svitzer against tugboat operators, also covered by the MUA, and Qantas, against international cabin crew.

The unions have done everything possible to isolate these workers, allowing the proceedings at Patrick to become a blueprint for an expanded assault on the

working class.

Patrick workers should reject this rotten deal and the union bureaucracy that cooked it up. They need to fight for the mass mobilisation of workers, including at Qantas and Svitzer, throughout the transport sector and more broadly, in opposition to the growing attacks on pay and conditions.

This requires a conscious break with the corporatised trade unions, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace.



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