

Australia: Svitzer tug workers to hold limited stoppage as unions prepare sell-out

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24 October 2022

Around 540 tug boat workers at Svitzer Australia are set to stop work for four hours on Wednesday at ports around the country, as part of a long-running dispute over a new enterprise agreement (EA).

The company has offered workers a wage “increase” of just 1.5 percent this year, far below the official annual inflation rate, which was already at 6.1 percent in June and is tipped to near 8 percent before the end of the year. This massive cut in real terms follows an effective pay freeze, as workers have not had a wage increase since their last EA expired in December 2019.

Svitzer is also demanding sweeping changes to conditions, including reductions to manning levels, increased workplace flexibility through greater use of casual labour and the slashing of full-day minimum shift lengths for casuals.

The four-hour stoppage is the latest in a string of sporadic and limited industrial action called by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Australia Maritime Officers Union (AMOU) and Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE). The unions have been forced to hold this action due to the determination of workers to fight Svitzer’s attacks, but have designed it to ensure minimal disruption to normal operations and profits. The purpose is to allow the frustrated and angry workers to let off steam while the union bureaucrats and management work out a rotten deal behind closed doors.

In order to ram through these attacks, the company has asked the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to terminate the expired EA, which would force workers on to the award—the legal minimum wages and conditions for the industry. This would potentially slash workers’ pay by up to 47 percent and destroy hard-won working conditions. A final hearing on this application is due in December.

The three unions have made no attempt to mobilise other sections of workers in the maritime industry or the broader working class against the company’s blatant move to intimidate workers into accepting a sell-out deal.

Instead, the unions have called on Svitzer to stop its application to cancel the EA, asked the pro-business Labor government to intervene, and appealed to Svitzer Global CEO Kasper Nilaus to join the negotiations. These plaintive demands reflect the bankrupt perspective the unions are promoting to workers.

The federal Labor government has made clear that its plan for workers involves at least another two years of cuts to real wages, as the working class is forced to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy, on top of the massive handouts to big business in the early stages of the pandemic and increasing military expenditure.

The appeal to the company’s global CEO is absurd. Svitzer, along with its parent corporation, Maersk is carrying out similar attacks throughout the world, as part of a global drive to cut costs and boost shareholder profits. One of the largest shipping companies in the world, Maersk reported profits last year of \$A38 billion (\$US24 billion).

Workers must reject the union’s program of pathetic appeals to Labor, the industrial courts, or the chiefs of multinational corporations. This is a path that can only lead to a sell-out.

To prevent yet another betrayal at the hands of the maritime unions, which have presided over the mass destruction of jobs, wages and conditions across the waterfront over decades, workers must take matters into their own hands.

This means forming new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers and completely independent of the unions.

These committees are the only mechanism through which the working class can discover and assert its immense power as the sole producer of value.

Svitzer workers should appeal to workers throughout the maritime sector in Australia and around the world and fight to build a unified struggle against the mounting assault on workers, being carried out to further the massive profits of the multinational shipping conglomerates.

Tug boat workers are essential to port operations and are therefore in a powerful position to wage a genuine fight for improved wages and conditions. Standing in the way are the corporatised maritime unions, which do everything in their power to suppress such a fight and enforce every demand of management, in order to retain their highly-paid “seat at the table.”

Over recent months, the unions have allowed the dispute to be buried in the industrial courts. Ahead of a series of conciliation hearings in the FWC, the unions agreed to suspend all industrial action, even after Svitzer refused to comply with the FWC’s request to abandon its EA termination case.

In reporting the September hearings to the AMOU membership, Senior Industrial Officer Jarrod Moran made clear the unions were preparing a sell-out. Moran wrote that the unions had put forward “the pragmatic position of maintaining conditions while sacrificing wage increases.”

The MUA issues continual reminders of Svitzer’s threat to tear up the EA, not from the standpoint of mobilising workers against it, but to reinforce the conception that workers’ only choice is between the sell-out union-management agreement and the industrial award.

The reality is that the unions, not only support the industrial tribunal’s power to terminate EAs, they rely upon it as a means of coercing workers to accept rotten deals.

As the class struggle in Australia and overseas has intensified over the past year, amid the ongoing pandemic and soaring cost of living, workers have increasingly rejected regressive union-management EAs. This has led to a spate of instances, including at Patrick Terminals and Qantas, in which the unions have utilised management’s threats of EA termination to ram through an unpopular pro-business deal.

While the maritime unions, along with the Australian

Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), have publicly criticised the right of companies to wield EA termination as a bargaining chip, their proposed solution is to grant the FWC even greater powers. This would allow the court to intervene much earlier in disputes, to impose the demands of business without the need for employers to resort to threats.

In other words, the unions are not only defending Australia’s existing draconian industrial relations laws, but calling for them to be sharpened. This is not an accident. The unions worked closely with the Rudd Labor government to draw up the existing “Fair Work” laws, and have enforced them ruthlessly ever since.

Workers must reject this whole framework. They are in a political struggle, not only against the company, but the pro-business governments, the industrial courts, Labor and the unions themselves. Only through rank-and-file committees can workers begin a genuine struggle, mobilising their immense power. But this poses the need for an alternative socialist perspective, which rejects the domination of the maritime and other crucial sectors by an ultra-wealthy financial oligarchy.



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