

Australian maritime unions declare “victory” after court bans strikes at Svitzer

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Australia’s maritime union leaders have hailed as a victory, Friday’s Fair Work Commission (FWC) order of a six-month suspension of all industrial action over a four-year enterprise bargaining dispute at Svitzer, Australia’s largest tugboat operator.

Maritime workers must draw the necessary conclusions from the unions’ response. If a six-month ban on all strikes is a victory, what else do the unions have in store for the tugboat crews and workers more broadly?

The ruling came in response to a provocative manoeuvre by the company last week, announcing that its 592 towage workers would be locked out indefinitely from midday Friday. Svitzer has an almost complete monopoly on tugboat operations at Australia’s ports, so the action would have effectively shut down the country’s shipping industry.

This would have resulted in thousands of workers throughout logistics being stood down or not offered shifts, a consequence that is only possible because decades of union-enforced enterprise agreements have allowed full-time positions to be slashed and replaced with casual and contract labour.

In response to the FWC decision, Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) national secretary Paddy Crumlin claimed that Svitzer had “been diminished in the most humiliatingly public way possible” by the “industrial umpire.” Crumlin did not mention that the “umpire” had stripped workers of any right to engage in any industrial action for the next six months.

Even before Thursday’s initial statement from the FWC that industrial action would be terminated or suspended, the MUA, Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU) and Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE) had all written to Svitzer to withdraw industrial action until after Christmas.

Svitzer’s threatened lockout was a calculated move to convince the FWC and the federal Labor government to step in and shut down workers’ stoppages on the basis that they posed a threat to the national economy. Under Australia’s draconian industrial relations law, an order to suspend or terminate industrial action applies to both parties—workers and the company—regardless of who initiated the action that prompted the ban.

While Svitzer was hoping for a complete termination, rather than a suspension, the industrial court has essentially delivered what the company sought—a guarantee of no disruption to operations and profits, even to the limited extent allowed by the sporadic and isolated stoppages called by the maritime unions.

The company’s perspective to terminate its current enterprise

agreement has not been abandoned. Hearings are due to resume in the FWC on December 8 over Svitzer’s application to do so. This move, launched by the company in February, would force workers onto industrial awards, slashing pay in half and destroying hard-won conditions.

In a media statement issued on Friday, Svitzer hailed the FWC’s suspension, declaring: “We welcome the certainty this brings to our customers and stakeholders.” While workers have been shackled by the FWC ruling, the company is free to conduct its business unhindered, with the exception of imposing another lockout. That could possibly include sackings or changes to working conditions.

The unions are in complete agreement. At a rally held at Port Botany in Sydney on Friday to protest the lockout, MUA Sydney deputy branch secretary Paul Garrett said the FWC ruling was “a really good achievement today” and “an absolute loss for Svitzer.”

This is a bald-faced lie.

The purpose of the ruling and its enthusiastic support by both Svitzer and the unions is the hope it will remove the danger of a rebellion of workers to a union-management deal, eliminate all coverage of the struggle from the media and further isolate the maritime workers.

The unions not only accepted the authority of the anti-worker FWC, they welcomed the strike ban, and are promoting the Albanese government’s proposed industrial relations legislation that would grant the industrial courts even more power to shut down strikes.

The unions’ celebration of Friday’s anti-democratic and pro-business ruling should stand as a warning for Svitzer workers about what the union bureaucracies and management are preparing behind closed doors. MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul Keating outlined the unions’ perspective on Friday, telling workers: “We say to Svitzer, ‘get back to the bargaining table and finish this agreement.’”

What lies ahead for workers, as long as their struggle is in the hands of the union bureaucracy, is an enterprise agreement that will slash their wages and conditions, whether it is brokered in union-management talks, or imposed by the industrial courts.

The company “offer” of a pay rise of just 1.5 percent this year, far below the official annual inflation rate of 7.3 percent, is a provocation. This massive wage cut in real terms follows an almost four-year pay freeze, as workers have had no increase since January 2019.

Svitzer is also seeking to lower manning levels, increase casualisation and slash minimum shift durations as part of an ongoing drive to place all the cost of the delays and inconsistent schedules inherent to the shipping industry onto the backs of workers.

To avoid this fate, workers must take matters into their own hands. This means making a conscious break with the unions and establishing new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, through which to democratically discuss, plan and direct a fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

Svitzer workers should reach out to the broadest layers of the working class, not just in Australia but around the world, who all face similar attacks on their living and working conditions. Inflation and interest rates are soaring globally, the threat of global nuclear war is becoming more real each day, and the COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to destroy health and lives as a result of the “let it rip” policies of capitalist governments.

The necessary global working-class counteroffensive cannot be built within the framework of the unions, whose comments over the past week have underscored their allegiance to the so-called “national economy”—that is, the interests of the Australian financial and corporate elite.

Sham internationalism

Highly conscious of the support for an international struggle, especially among workers in the shipping industry, who work alongside international crews every day, the maritime union bureaucrats posture as internationalists. Nothing could be further from the truth. Their hollow gestures amount to little more than photos, videos and messages of “solidarity” from other union officials.

In a statement following the FWC decision by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), of which Crumlin is president, Dave Heindel, chair of the ITF Seafarers Section declared: “Our network of over 400 maritime affiliates and over 700 transport unions globally, stand ready and waiting to mobilise to support the Svitzer crew.”

Beware! When well-heeled union leaders in any country declare they “stand ready and waiting to mobilise support” it means a betrayal is well in train. These highly paid individuals, who sit on pension and company boards, represent not the interests of workers but of the governments and corporations in their respective countries. “Internationalism” is only wheeled out as a cover for their nationalist and corporatist positions.

Heindel was quick to portray Svitzer’s lockout as an Australian aberration, stressing that his union has “a positive working relationship with Maersk in the US, where we get around the table to talk through issues and come to mutually agreeable solutions.”

As the ITF and the maritime unions have done throughout the protracted dispute, the statement appealed to Svitzer’s Danish parent company, Maersk, to ensure that its Australian subsidiary upholds “core Maersk values.”

The truth is that Svitzer Australia’s attack on workers is just one component of a global cost-cutting offensive by Maersk, which expects to record \$US29.4 billion in profits this year, shattering its 2021 record of \$17.9 billion, which was the highest figure ever recorded by a shipping company. Earlier this year, Svitzer, with the collaboration of the Unite union, imposed a 5 percent pay “rise”—well below the inflation rate of 9.4 percent—at Teesport in the UK.

The ITF’s promotion of the lies that Svitzer workers face a peculiarly Australian attack, and that Maersk’s international directors will intervene on their behalf, is deliberately engineered to prevent any unified mobilisation of workers across international lines.

Svitzer’s agreement termination threat is intended as a knife for the union bureaucrats to hold to the throat of workers to persuade them that accepting a regressive deal is the only alternative to being forced onto the award. The MUA executed this method at Patrick Terminals earlier this year, ramming through a deal containing real wage cuts and the loss of conditions, including the right of workers to have a say in the hiring and firing of workers. The tactic has also been employed by Qantas this year in several disputes.

Workers are now legally powerless to oppose this attack, as a direct result of the FWC suspension order. This is a warning that the company’s bid to tear up the agreement is another manoeuvre that the unions are on board with.

The increasing use of agreement termination threats, lockouts and manoeuvres such as that carried out by Svitzer is a reflection of mounting opposition among workers to the efforts of union bureaucrats to ram through sell-out deals, and the concerns of the ruling class that the unions will not be able to contain an explosion of this unrest in the working class.

But this opposition will only find expression if workers break free from the stranglehold of the unions and form their own organisations through which to advance their struggle.

The attack on Svitzer workers is part of a global assault on the working class. A unified fight against this can only be built through a global network of rank-and-file committees. The International Committee of the Fourth International stands alone in advancing a perspective for such a struggle, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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