

# Australian maritime workers respond to union sellout at Svitzer

Our reporters  
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Last month, Australia's largest tugboat operator, Svitzer, announced that a slim majority of its almost 600 workers had voted to accept a new enterprise agreement that will lock in real wage cuts for the next five years.

The deal brought to an end a four-year bargaining process that included one of the most significant attacks on Australian workers' rights in the past decade, when Svitzer threatened to lock out its entire workforce and bring the maritime industry to a standstill.

As the company intended, the move resulted in the intervention of the Fair Work Commission (FWC), which brought down a six-month strike ban, stripping workers of any legal right to oppose the slashing of their wages and conditions.

As the end of the suspension neared, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers and Australian Maritime Officers Union hurriedly signed off on an in-principle agreement with management.

The unions told workers that, while the deal was "far from perfect," it was "likely to be the best it can get." They warned that a "no" vote would only lead to a worse agreement being imposed by the FWC.

At the last minute, the MUA tried to distance itself from the rotten deal by calling for a "no" vote two days before the ballot opened, claiming to have only just noticed that important clauses pertaining to outsourcing had been left out of the final agreement.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to maritime workers about the union sellout at Svitzer and the conditions confronting workers throughout the industry.

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Jeremy, a Svitzer worker, said, "I don't think anyone is calling this any type of historic victory.

"I'm unaware of anyone who is happy with it. There's two crowds. One crowd voted 'yes' because they're sick of it and see that we're not going to get anything better. The other crowd just aren't happy with it.

"I was wedged between a rock and a hard place, not being happy with the outcome, but not having a guaranteed outcome under the untested new industrial relations laws. I'm not happy with the agreement but I voted 'yes' because I'm unsure I'm going to get a better agreement through the company and I'm not happy to send it to the Fair Work Commission."

Jeremy described the financial pressure he and his colleagues came under during the drawn-out bargaining process: "The last pay rise was the first month of 2019. You reel off expenses and the money you have in your pocket just isn't there. In real terms, over the four years, we've had a pay cut of about 20 percent."

At the same time as workers grappled with the rising cost of living, "Svitzer put their rates up for customers with the CPI announcements," Jeremy noted.

Jeremy said the MUA's last-minute call for a no vote was "very confusing. They certainly weren't united in what they said. We voted on a document that was sent out, but we didn't do a drafting as such where both sides sit down.

"We were trying to get something put in about outsourcing but [Svitzer] were only happy for it to be put in for 12 months, along the lines of 'Svitzer agree not to outsource work for the next 12 months.' So after 12 months it is okay for them to outsource."

Arthur, a maritime worker in Melbourne, said, "the MUA reported the deal at Svitzer was a good result, which I don't think it was at all. The union didn't represent the workers, as per normal, they sold them out. They said 'this is the best deal you're going to

get.’ That’s the MUA for you.

“They’re another arm of the Labor Party. We’re told when the election is on that we have to go and hand out for the Labor Party. They’re not independent whatsoever. I think it’s wrong.

“Fair Work was introduced by the Labor Party and that stopped workers’ right to have a strike. You’ve got to go through the Commission to have a strike. So when a company treats you badly, the workers have no rights anymore. All it does is line the pockets of these barristers and solicitors who represent either the companies or the unions.”

Arthur said workers throughout the maritime sector faced similar attacks as those at Svitzer: “The companies make huge profits but the wages don’t go up with inflation. When you’ve got a business model determined by bonuses then wages are your enemy. The less wages you provide for the workers the bigger bonus the person at the top gets.

“We work rain, hail or shine. We don’t go off when it’s too hot or too cold. But people think when things are held up it’s because of the waterfront workers.”

Arthur also pointed to the fundamental incompatibility of the profit system with vital public infrastructure. He said, “The tugs should be run by the government anyway, it’s such an important industry. It’s an essential service.”

Leo, a worker at DP World said of the Svitzer deal, “You’re talking about a global behemoth of a company that rakes in multi billions of dollars for their stakeholders. They’re on lucrative government contracts and they’re offering a pittance to workers. They haven’t paid any pay rise for four years, now they’ve got a paltry pay rise and they can outsource you at any time [after the first 12 months of the agreement].

“After four years of negotiations, for the MUA to at the last minute say ‘no, no, no, don’t accept it’ shows what a disgrace the MUA is. We all know the devil is in the detail. That message wouldn’t have gotten out to all the Svitzer blokes.

“A lot of the membership are saying if the company draws a line in the sand and isn’t going to budge, we usually go to the Fair Work Commission. It’s supposed to be an independent umpire.

“You would like to think you would get a fair outcome, but do we trust them? The union will say

‘take this deal boys, that’s all you’re going to get, if you go to the Commission you’re rolling the dice.’ But these are the same unions that wanted the Commission.

“The message we’ve got to get out is that these commissioners are stacked up as puppets for the government of the day. The consensus where I work is we’ll go to the Commission, we’ll take it on. If the Commission agrees with everything the company says, then we’ll have the real big fight because we’ll say it not fair and just.”

The sellout at Svitzer underscores that, to fight for decent wages and conditions, workers need to take up a political struggle against Labor and the industrial courts. This is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus, which serves as an industrial police force for the corporate and financial elite.

Instead, workers need to build rank-and-file committees in every port, factory and workplace and begin to democratically discuss, prepare and carry out a fight for their own interests.



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