

Australia: Labor urges union-management deal in DP World dispute

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The Australian Labor government last week deflected calls from big-business lobbyists and the corporate press to shut down industrial action by DP World port workers around the country.

Labor is reluctant to intervene directly because it knows it sits atop a powder keg amid a growing cost-of-living crisis and mounting opposition to its agenda of austerity and war.

Instead, the government is counting on the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) to bring its members into line and impose an enterprise agreement that meets the demands of management.

The union bureaucracy has given Labor every reason to believe that it will come through, in sellouts across the waterfront over decades, and in the current DP World dispute. Last week, the MUA called off most planned industrial action after the company said it would dock workers' pay.

Speaking publicly on Thursday after meetings with DP World and the MUA, Workplace Relations Minister Tony Burke urged DP World to do what "every other business in Australia is expected to." That is, work out a backroom deal with the union bureaucracy, with the assistance of the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) if necessary.

To the extent that Burke made any criticism of DP World, his primary complaint was that the company was not properly adhering to this well-established formula. The concern for Labor and the union apparatus is that this failure to follow protocol could provoke a response from workers that the MUA would struggle to control.

The whole framework of enterprise bargaining and Fair Work was established by Labor and the unions for exactly this reason—to hose down industrial action, keep workers on the job, minimise disruption to profits and keep pay negotiations a matter for the bureaucrats, businessmen and industrial courts.

This was the purpose of the industrial relations reform rushed through parliament by Burke in late 2022. The measures expanded the anti-strike powers of the FWC, including granting the tribunal the capacity to shut down "intractable" disputes and impose management's demands through arbitration.

Burke sought to characterise the situation confronting DP World workers as an aberration, the product of a rogue foreign operator, headed by a nasty individual. In fact, what DP World is carrying out is nothing more than the wage-slashing,

"productivity"-boosting program of the Labor government and the corporate elite.

While big-business lobbyists and the corporate press denounced Burke's "extraordinary spray" against DP World and "refusal" to intervene, their disagreement is not a matter of substance, but of tactics. All parties agree that working class wages and conditions must be slashed. While Labor and substantial segments of the ruling elite view the corporatised unions as the essential mechanism for imposing this agenda, another wing of big business is demanding a more direct onslaught.

DP World is trying to impose a 13-percent nominal pay rise over four years, a major pay cut in real terms. This is lower, but not hugely so, than the average nominal annual wage increase in enterprise agreements struck last year of around 4 percent.

DP World is also attacking other conditions, seeking rostering and penalty rate changes that could cut wages by up to one third, and force workers to complete 65 weekend shifts per year, up from 52.

Again, this is completely in line with union-management deals imposed by the MUA in recent years, as the handful of multinational corporations that control Australia's ports seek to strip away conditions won by maritime workers through decades of bitter struggle. Their goal is to eliminate full-time employment and build an entirely on-call workforce so that workers, not shareholders, must bear the cost of the delays and fluctuations intrinsic to the shipping industry.

Burke's attempt to separate DP World from this broader assault on the working class is aimed at covering up the central role of Labor and the unions in perpetrating it.

Federal and state Labor governments—aided at every turn by the unions—have been at the forefront of the attack on wages, delivering sub-inflationary increases across the public sector, including in health and education. As recently as this month, the Western Australian Labor government handed down a 3 percent nominal pay rise for nurses and midwives in the state.

Under Labor's federal "budget repair" process, nominal spending on health, education, social security and welfare will increase by only around 1 percent per annum over the next four years. That is not even enough to keep pace with the rising (and ageing) population, let alone inflation.

In line with the government's goal of increasing unemployment to 4.5 percent, the Reserve Bank of Australia has hiked interest rates 13 times in the past 18 months, adding thousands of dollars to monthly mortgage payments. The aim is to suppress workers' demands for wage increases.

Underlying all of this is the need to make the working class foot the bill for growing military expenditure. In line with Labor's commitment to the US-led drive to global conflict, federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers has identified military capacity as a "priority" in the next federal budget.

Labor is acutely aware that its austerity agenda is meeting growing opposition. With its 2022 election promise of a "better future" exposed as a fraud and the cost-of-living crisis only worsening, hostility to the Labor government is mounting.

While the unions have so far managed to suppress any major industrial unrest, more than 5,000 workers each month are voting in favour of strikes and other industrial action against the assault on their working and living conditions.

At the same time, for the past 15 weeks, in line with protests globally, pro-Palestinian demonstrators have rallied in their thousands, often tens-of-thousands, in Sydney, Melbourne and other major Australian cities. These protests have not only been directed at Israel's genocidal regime, but its imperialist backers worldwide, including the Labor government.

The ports are a particular focal point. Vessels from the Israeli Zim shipping line, which dedicated its entire fleet to the genocide in October, load and unload at Australian ports every week. In the face of widespread opposition to this collaboration, including in limited community protests at the ports, the MUA and the Labor governments have ensured that it continues without any industrial action against the genocide.

Labor, the unions and the entire political establishment are determined to avoid any confluence of the parallel currents of industrial unrest and broader political protest.

It is these changed circumstances that explain Burke's reluctance to openly call for an end to industrial action at DP World, as he did as recently as November 2022 in the Svitzer dispute. The strike ban that resulted from Labor's intervention was hailed as a victory by the maritime unions, which ultimately used it as a lever to impose a sell-out deal in July last year.

The trade union apparatus has been even more forthright than Burke in promoting the lie that what workers confront at DP World is somehow separate from the broader class struggle.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary Sally McManus said on ABC News Breakfast earlier this week, "Dubai Ports, which is owned by the Royal Family of Dubai [is] saying to Australians, 'you should have a pay cut.'"

McManus continued: "Money in the pockets of working people means money in the pockets of the communities ... rather than in the bank accounts of the Royal Family of Dubai."

What are workers supposed to conclude from this? Should they accept the evisceration of their pay and conditions, as long

as the corporation deriving profits from their deepening exploitation is headquartered in Melbourne or Sydney?

McManus spouts this nationalist filth as a means of cutting workers off from the common struggles of their counterparts worldwide, and keeping them tied to Labor and "Australian" capitalism.

It is also designed to cover over the unions' own filthy role over decades, and that of Labor, in imposing the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions and blocking the development of any challenge to it by workers.

This is what must be built. What DP World workers confront is a joint offensive of management, government and the union bureaucracy. This means that a fight for a real pay rise and improved conditions will require a rebellion against the MUA bureaucracy.

New organisations of struggle, democratically led by workers, not bureaucrats tied by a thousand threads to finance capital and the Labor government, must be formed in every port. Through these rank-and-file committees, workers can establish demands based on their actual needs, not whatever crumbs the company is prepared to offer up.

To succeed, workers will need to take up not just an industrial struggle, but a political one, directed against the entire political establishment, including Labor, the industrial courts and the draconian anti-strike laws they enforce.

This fight can only be waged through a complete rejection of the nationalist division promoted by the unions. Maritime and other logistics workers everywhere confront the same attacks. To build the necessary unified struggle against this assault, DP World workers will need to reach out to their Australian counterparts at Patrick, Qube and Hutchison, and throughout the global shipping industry and more broadly.



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