Australian maritime union pushes sellout deal with DP World

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The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) yesterday announced it had reached an "in-principle agreement" with DP World in an enterprise bargaining dispute that began early last year.

Although workers have not even seen the full proposed agreement, let alone voted on it, the union has called off all industrial action planned by the around 1,800 workers at the stevedoring company. By preemptively cancelling even the limited stoppages and work bans it had previously allowed, the union leadership is ensuring that all pressure is on workers to accept the deal, while the company can do whatever it wants.

In its media release and on social media, the MUA was more than usually tight-lipped about the contents of the deal, saying only that it would deliver "fair pay, safety and work-life balance." The union's resort to these banal and meaningless phrases reflects concern that workers may reject the proposed agreement, which any closer inspection would reveal to be a complete sell-out.

The only concrete detail contained in the announcement—that it was a four-year deal—itself admits a concession on the union's stated aim to secure a two-year deal that would more closely align its expiry with that of other maritime agreements.

According to reports in the corporate media today, the agreement contains a nominal pay rise of 8 percent in the first year, followed by 7 percent, 4 percent and 4.5 percent in subsequent years.

While higher, at least in the first two years, than the official inflation rate of 4.1 percent, a massive understatement of the soaring cost of living, the proposed pay increase falls far short of compensating workers for past losses. The previous 2019 union-management agreement delivered nominal annual pay rises of just 2.5 percent, even as inflation peaked at 8.1 percent. Again, workers will be locked in to a four-year deal, with no right to re-negotiate if the cost of living soars again.

As recently as two weeks ago, the MUA was claiming the deal would tackle what it estimated was a 17 percent pay differential between DP World workers and their counterparts at other stevedoring companies. The in-principle agreement will not even begin to address this.

The press reports indicate that the proposed agreement is a total capitulation on rostering changes that will both cut workers' take-home pay and reduce their quality of life. Indeed, the company plans to introduce these changes from Monday, even though workers have not yet voted on the agreement.

The MUA, while silent on the roster changes now, has previously said that they will cut pay for some workers by up to 32 percent, and increase the number of weekend shifts workers are expected to complete each year from 52 to 65.

MUA assistant national secretary Adrian Evans told the *Australian Financial Review* in November that, under the new system, DP World would be able to "cancel any shift with zero notice and zero payment." A third of shifts would be deemed "irregular," meaning workers could be required to come in at short notice, as late as 5 p.m. the afternoon before.

These changes, along with the slashing of penalty rates, are directed towards eliminating full-time work and establishing a 24-7 on-call workforce, in which no worker is ever paid a cent unless they are actively producing profit for the company. The aim is to force workers to bear the full burden of the delays and last-minute schedule changes inherent in the shipping industry.

By announcing the in-principle agreement Friday, effectively declaring the dispute over, and cancelling industrial action, the MUA has given DP World free rein to implement its changes without opposition from workers.

The MUA bureaucracy is sending a clear message to workers: The deal is done and dusted, your vote is nothing more than a formality, and there is nothing you can do to stop the company from slashing your conditions.

DP World workers should reject the union's attempt to sell-out their struggle and ram through a rotten deal. It is up to workers, not well-heeled bureaucrats to decide what is "fair pay" and "work-life balance."

Mass meetings must be held, in which all workers have the opportunity to speak and democratically decide whether industrial action should be resumed until they have had the opportunity to examine the final draft agreement.

In order to fight for real pay increases, with no concessions on rostering or other conditions, workers first need to understand what they are up against—a joint union-management-government offensive.

The nature of this operation was confirmed yesterday by federal Labor Workplace Relations Minister Tony Burke, who declared, "this is how enterprise bargaining is meant to work."

Last month, Burke was criticised in the financial press for declining to directly intervene in the dispute and shut down the industrial action. Labor did not want to become directly involved, for fear that such an intervention could become the focal point of much broader anger in the working class.

Instead, Burke placed his trust in the MUA bureaucracy and the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to deliver a deal that would satisfy the demands of the company.

The FWC did not order a suspension of industrial action in this dispute, in large part because the union withdrew planned stoppages when the company tried to force such an intervention. But the mere fact that the industrial court is empowered to do so under Australia's draconian anti-strike laws was relied upon by the MUA to justify its refusal to call any substantial industrial action.

The tribunal still played a major role in the negotiations, with the union-management agreement hammered out in the course of numerous FWC meetings and hearings.

The declaration of in-principle agreement vindicates Burke's trust and confirms the union's agreement with Labor's perspective, that industrial disputes must increasingly be a matter for bureaucrats and lawyers, not workers. Evans noted yesterday, "the past fortnight has shown how quickly a fair and sustainable deal can be resolved once both the workforce and the employer are fully engaged in the negotiation process."

This statement is a promise from the MUA bureaucracy to big business and the Labor government—"give us a seat at the negotiating table and we will get you everything you want."

This reflects the union's role as an industrial enforcer, defending the interests of the corporate and financial elite against the working class. The MUA has carried out this task for decades, enforcing the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions across the waterfront.

Workers at DP World and throughout the maritime sector cannot possibly advance their interests through such an organisation.

This poses the urgent need for waterfront workers to build new fighting organisations, rank-and-file committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers themselves. In the first instance, such a committee must develop a fight for a "no" vote in the ballot on the sell-out deal.

By organising independently, DP World workers can prepare a new set of demands, based on their own interests, including real pay rises and improved, not worsened, conditions, and a plan of action through which to fight.

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. DP World workers will need to turn out to broader layers of workers throughout the maritime sector, who confront the same attacks all around the world, starting with their Australian counterparts at Patrick, Qube and Hutchison.