

Maritime Union of Australia embraces pro-Israel, pro-war, Albanese at national conference

Martin Scott
10 March 2024

On February 29, the Adelaide Convention Centre was the site of an episode that summed up the complicity of Australia's unions in Israel's barbaric onslaught against the Palestinian people.

Outside the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) Quadrennial National Conference, protesters rallied against the genocide and denounced Australia's federal Labor government for supporting it.

Inside, the union leadership welcomed the head of that government, Anthony Albanese, to the stage to discuss the Maritime Strategic Fleet (MSF), which will further integrate maritime workers into the war plans of Australian and US imperialism.

Covering over the reality of this union-government love-fest, MUA Sydney Branch Secretary Paul Keating claimed in a press release last week that the National Conference "re-confirmed our decades long commitment to fight the genocide in Gaza, and stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine."

The only honest word in this statement is "re-confirmed." That is, the MUA will continue to do precisely what it has done since October 7: Posture on occasion as supporters of "block the dock" protests while ensuring that waterfront workers continue to handle cargo for Israeli shipping lines on a daily basis.

In the same press release, Christy Cain, a long-standing MUA leader and the national secretary of its parent organisation, the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union, declared, "the Albanese government is complicit in genocide." He offered no explanation for why the organisation he leads invited an accomplice to war crimes to speak at its national conference.

Cain continued: "We call on the Albanese government to immediately implement sanctions on Israel, beginning with refusing Zim shipping access to Australian ports."

Cain knows full well that the Labor government, which continues to expand its support for the Zionist regime, will do no such thing. He is promoting illusions in an appeal to parliament as a substitute for concrete action against the genocide by workers, which the union is doing everything it can to prevent.

Since the Palestinian trade unions' urgent call in October for solidarity actions by workers overseas, the MUA has not called a single strike or industrial action aimed at blocking Israel's supply chain or profits.

The MUA bureaucracy's opposition to such action has been clear from the outset. At a November 3 meeting of Trade Unionists

for Palestine, when a Socialist Equality Party member asked Keating if strikes would be called, he was forcibly ejected from the union's Sussex Street headquarters.

The MUA leaders, and their pseudo-left cheer squad continually justify their refusal to call political strikes on the grounds that it would be "illegal" under Australia's draconian industrial relations legislation. This claim is exposed as a total fraud by the MUA's embrace at its conference of the prime minister, who is ultimately responsible for the continued existence of the so-called Fair Work Act. In fact, the three sets of industrial relations "reform" introduced since 2022 by the Albanese government have only strengthened the anti-strike powers of the pro-business Fair Work Commission.

The union's hostility to action by workers against the genocide was starkly expressed at a "community picket" at Webb Dock, Melbourne, in January. Over several days, protesters resisted repeated attempts by pepper-spray-wielding police to break up the demonstration. Initially, union officials allowed workers to refuse to cross the picket, on "health and safety" grounds. But when management arranged a bus to transport workers across the picket with a police escort, the MUA urged organisers to shut down the protest, even though workers were refusing to board the bus.

The episode was a clear example of Cain's comment last week: "There has never been an issue where the political elite have been so starkly opposed to the view of the great mass of working people." The critical part he left unsaid was on which side of that divide the MUA bureaucracy stands.

Albanese had no such reservations when addressing the MUA conference. He effusively praised the work of MUA National Secretary Paddy Crumlin—"a good and loyal friend"—and Assistant National Secretary Mich-Elle Myers—also, he noted, a national vice president of the Australian Labor Party.

To this list of allies, Albanese added Philippine President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, who, earlier that day had told parliament the two countries must "join forces, together with our partners, in the face of threats to the rule of law, to stability, and to peace." This was a thinly-veiled statement of total commitment to the US-led war drive against China.

These war preparations are central to what was the main component of the prime minister's address, the establishment of the MSF. Its purpose is to channel vast sums of public funds into

the hands of major shipping companies in the form of subsidies and tax breaks if they agree to register their vessels in Australia.

These ships will then be available to be commandeered by the government for military purposes, with compensation paid to ensure that corporate profits are not impacted by the defence of the “national interest.” The composition of the fleet will be carefully designed to suit Australian imperialism’s military needs in the Indo-Pacific.

The MSF has been promoted by Labor and the MUA under the phoney pretext that it will provide secure, well-paid jobs for Australian seafarers. The reality is that whatever government handouts and concessions are granted to the corporate owners of these vessels, workers will be subjected to the same cost-cutting measures carried out by the major shipping lines over decades and enforced by the MUA.

Continuing attacks on workers’ wages and conditions is not the end of the story. A key element of the union-backed MSF plan is the capacity for civilian seafarers to be dragooned into military operations. The MSF Taskforce’s December final report urges the government to address the “limited scope” of the existing Defence Act which “only provides for the Government to compel owners to provide (and ‘furnish’) vessels, but not crew.”

All of this has been worked out through the closest collaboration of the union, big business and the Labor government. Crumlin serves on the Taskforce with corporate representatives of the logistics, communications, maritime and mining industries, as well as the Department of Defence.

These are the interests that the MUA represents, not those of the working class, whether in Australia, Palestine or anywhere else. It functions as an industrial police force, enforcing the demands of corporations and governments, suppressing strikes and ramming through one sell-out enterprise agreement after another.

This is not an aberration, but the result of an international process that took place primarily in the 1980s and 1990s. In an earlier period of nationally regulated economies, the unions were able to extract limited concessions from employers as a means of heading off the development of organised opposition among workers to capitalism.

The globalisation of production rendered such national-reformist programs unviable, with corporations increasingly free to shift production around the world to minimise labour costs. The unions were compelled by their nationalist, pro-capitalist orientation to defend the so-called “national interest” by enforcing ever-greater attacks on workers’ wages and conditions to ensure that “local” business remained “internationally competitive.”

The logical extension of this is the unions’ increasingly open support of imperialism, which now extends to blocking pro-Palestinian strikes and protests, as well as promoting the integration of workers into the war machine through initiatives like the MSF.

The MUA’s tacit complicity in the Gaza genocide and its active collaboration in preparations for war in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere are intimately connected. Both represent the subordination of the interests of seafarers and the broader working class to the demands of Australian and US imperialism.

The union bureaucracy is not merely an ally of the political

establishment, but an essential component of it. Any claim by the bureaucrats to present themselves as a separate entity to the government, issuing appeals and critical demands on behalf of workers, is a fraud.

The top layers of the union apparatus—like Albanese’s “good and loyal friend”—are the major powerbrokers in the Labor Party, with the capacity to bring down state premiers and even prime ministers. The union leaders, far from challenging government policy, are instrumental in writing it.

Twenty-two successive weeks of mass protests around the country against the genocide shows clearly that there is mass opposition among Australian workers and young people to Labor’s program of war, but this finds no expression in the MUA or other trade unions, which, determined to defend the capitalist establishment, continue to block strikes, discourage workers from protesting, and refuse to defend workers who have been persecuted for speaking up.

Albanese’s appearance at the MUA conference is also a damning indictment of the pseudo-left organisations that have promoted the union as a leading force in the Palestinian struggle. Solidarity, at least one leading member of which attended the conference, has been especially forthright in defending the MUA’s strike-breaking and insisting that the only way forward for those determined to keep Israeli ships out of Australian ports is to appeal to the bureaucracy.

This is consciously directed at blocking what is actually needed for the working class to stop genocide and war: A fight to build new organisations, rank-and-file committees run by workers themselves, not privileged bureaucrats, to wage a struggle for a new, socialist and internationalist, political perspective. Neither imperialist war, nor the assault on working-class living and working conditions through which it is financed, can be defeated within the nationalist framework of the unions.

What is required is a unified struggle by the international working class against the root cause of war—abroad and at home—the capitalist profit system.



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