

SEP (Australia) members menaced while campaigning against CFMEU administration

Our reporters
25 October 2024

On two occasions over the past month, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) have been threatened and obstructed while campaigning on building sites in Melbourne against the Labor government's imposition of an administrator over the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

The SEP has explained that the administration, brought in last month, is a major attack on the democratic rights of the working class. It has nothing to do with unsubstantiated accusations of criminal activity within the CFMEU. Instead, the union has been placed under the quasi-dictatorial control of a government-appointed lawyer to drive down the wages and conditions of a historically militant section of the working class.

The SEP is fighting to mobilise the entire working class to defeat the administration. It has explained that the sole preoccupation of the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy is the reinstatement of its own privileged position within the framework of Australia's draconian industrial relations set up.

The CFMEU officials, including those who have been sacked by the administrator, have focussed their activities on backroom maneuvers and lobbying.

No less than the Labor government, the administrator and the rest of the union bureaucracy, they are fearful that any mobilisation of construction workers against administration would escape the control of the CFMEU leadership. This would jeopardise their opportunist overtures to the Labor government, as well as the whole program of suppressing the class struggle, which the CFMEU has helped to enforce over decades.

It is within this context that the attacks on SEP campaigners have occurred.

The most serious incident to date took place on

Wednesday morning at a construction site in the World Trade Centre precinct of Melbourne's docklands.

Two SEP campaigners were distributing leaflets, advertising the SEP's October 27 meeting, which will discuss how to take forward the fight against the administration. An unidentified man came out of the site, accompanied by two others, including one man who had earlier told the SEP campaigners to go away.

The unidentified man snatched a leaflet from one of the SEP campaigners. He then attempted to grab the stack of leaflets that the SEP campaigner was holding. When this was unsuccessful, the man shoved the SEP campaigner, forcing him to take a step backwards onto the road to retain his balance.

When the SEP members protested, the man complained that the SEP was interfering with "our members." That was clearly a reference to the SEP's fight for the establishment of rank-and-file committees of construction workers, independent of the CFMEU leadership, to develop the struggle against administration.

On the same morning, at a nearby World Trade Centre site, other SEP members were menaced and told to "f*ck off" by another unidentified individual, indicating a degree of coordination by forces defending the CFMEU bureaucracy.

Wednesday's incident was preceded by another at the World Trade Centre site on September 27. The same man who shoved the SEP member this week had accosted SEP campaigners on that occasion as well.

In the September 27 interaction, the SEP was distributing a leaflet against the administration, which included "CFMEU" in its headline. The man demanded to know "Who printed this? Why is CFMEU written on there?"

When the SEP members explained that it was an

article from the WSWS, opposing the administration, he replied: “Don’t be handing this to our blokes until we’ve read it first. You should have had the f*cking decency to come to our office and tell us before you started. You can’t be doing this.”

The SEP members stated that they had a democratic right to distribute articles, to which the man responded, “I don’t give a f*ck about your democratic right,” before returning to the site.

That contempt for democratic rights is not only directed against the SEP, but at construction workers themselves. The unidentified man, who clearly implied he was acting on behalf of the CFMEU bureaucracy, was arrogating to himself the “right” to determine what construction workers can and cannot read.

The incidents are revealing of the real position of the bureaucracy. Its opposition to administration is solely tactical. The CFMEU officialdom is hostile to the fact that administration deprives it of its legally-enshrined position at the negotiating table, with governments and corporations, from which the substantial privileges of the bureaucracy derive.

But, as the man’s comments make clear, the CFMEU leadership could care less about the implications of administration for the democratic rights of workers. The CFMEU bureaucracy itself is no less hostile to the democratic rights of construction workers than is the government or the administrator.

When the moves towards administration began, the CFMEU leaders declared that they would cooperate. Their only concern was that they keep their jobs. Only after at least 270 officials and organisers were sacked in September did the ousted CFMEU leadership call two token strike rallies. CFMEU speakers at the rally bemoaned administration, but outlined no perspective whatsoever to fight it.

Layers of the bureaucracy have retained their position under administration, including Zach Smith, the CFMEU construction division’s national secretary. While bemoaning administration and occasionally appearing alongside the ousted CFMEU officials, Smith has made clear that he will act under the discipline of the administrator. His position, as a flunkey of the government dictatorship over construction workers, shows what the ousted CFMEU bureaucrats aspire to.

The SEP calls for workers and all defenders of

democratic rights to oppose the attacks against its campaigners. Construction workers must be able to have the widest democratic discussion about how to fight this historic assault on their rights, free from the interference and censorship efforts of the union bureaucracy.

That again underscores the urgency of developing independent rank-and-file committees at building sites across the country. Through a network of such committees, construction workers can link up and plan joint political and industrial action to defeat administration and resist the associated onslaught on their wages and conditions.

Above all, workers are confronted with major political issues. The administration raises the need for a political fight against the Labor government and the capitalist state, on whose behalf administration has been imposed. Such a struggle, against the Fair Work industrial relations framework, the courts and every other official institution, is anathema to the union bureaucracy, which defends the entire set-up of class suppression.

These critical issues will be discussed at the SEP’s meeting tomorrow on the way forward to fight administration. We urge workers to attend.

SEP meeting: Labor’s takeover of the CFMEU: An attack on the working class

Sydney

2 p.m. (AEDT) Sunday, October 27

Belmore Senior Citizens Centre, 38 Redman Parade, Belmore, NSW

Reserve your seat in Sydney here.

Melbourne

2 p.m. (AEDT) Sunday, October 27

Activity Room 2, Kathleen Syme Library, 251 Faraday St, Carlton, VIC

Reserve your seat in Melbourne here.

If you can’t attend in person, the meeting will be livestreamed. Register for the Zoom livestream using this link.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact