

SEP meeting in Australia calls for building worker rank-and-file committees to fight CFMEU administration

Our reporters
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On Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting that called on building workers to form independent rank-and-file committees, to fight the Labor government's imposition of an administrator over the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

Dozens of young people and workers, including several CFMEU members, participated in the meeting, which was held at physical locations in Sydney and Melbourne. Attendees from across the country and some from internationally, including the US and New Zealand, also took part through Zoom.

The event provided a comprehensive analysis of the CFMEU administration and drew the connection between this attack on construction workers, and the crisis of capitalism within Australia and internationally.

Critically, the meeting drew out key historical experiences of building workers and other sections of the working class, that hold key lessons for today. Those experiences were brought to life by working-class SEP members, who recounted the party's fight for a socialist perspective at some of the key turning points of the class struggle in Australia over the past forty years.

Chairing the meeting, SEP member Luch Lopez explained that the administration was an attack on the entire working class.

Placing the meeting in its broader context, Lopez noted that it was being held the day after Israeli airstrikes on Iran, which pointed to the acute danger of a region wide and world war. He also raised the need for workers to recognise the global character of their struggles, highlighting in particular the recent rebellion by American Boeing workers against a union-backed sellout agreement and the fight by the SEP (US) for rank-and-file committees among that strategic section of workers.

The opening report was delivered by Michael Coggins, an SEP National Committee member who is centrally involved in the coverage of Australian workers' struggles on the WWS.

Coggins gave a detailed outline of what the administration entails, its purpose and the political issues it poses before workers. He explained: "A lawyer hand-picked by the Labor government, Mark Irving KC, is now the effective dictator of the construction division. Any industrial action CFMEU members want to take to fight for their jobs, wages and conditions is now subject to the approval of a senior barrister who answers only to the state.

"He is empowered to dismiss union officials, employees and

workplace delegates, expel union members, determine when and under what circumstances elections can be held and oversee the union's day-to-day operations."

Even within the context of Australia's draconian industrial relations regime, this marked a new stage in the assault on workers' rights. It had nothing to do with entirely unsubstantiated media allegations of CFMEU links to criminality.

By providing a detailed timeline, Coggins established that the imposition of administration involved a "conspiracy" by "the Labor government, police agencies, the construction companies and the union bureaucracy," who "all colluded to enforce this attack on construction workers." The aim, as is increasingly openly stated in the financial press, is to drive down the wages and conditions of building workers.

The speaker explained that this attack had been facilitated by the CFMEU leadership itself. It had blocked any mobilisation against the plans to impose administration, instead focussing on behind-the-scenes negotiations and deals with the government and the industrial authorities.

The sole preoccupation of the CFMEU officials was to try to retain their privileged position within the repressive industrial relations framework. That was one expression, Coggins said, of the transformation of all the union bureaucracies into a thoroughly corporatised force committed to imposing the dictates of governments and big business.

He outlined the SEP's call for rank-and-file committees to fight the administration, contrasting it with phony "rank-and-file" groups established by fake-left groups such as Socialist Alliance. These functioned as fronts for the CFMEU leadership, uncritically repeating its pronouncements and directing workers to lobby Labor and the rest of the union bureaucracy.

The SEP, on the other hand, was fighting for "a real rank-and-file movement. Such a movement means a complete rebellion, against both the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy and the CFMEU leaders who remain in the union collaborating with the administrator."

Through genuine rank-and-file committees that they control, workers could link up throughout the construction sector, and more broadly, to organise an industrial and political fight to end the administration. This was a political fight against Labor and every institution of the capitalist state, posing the need for an

alternative socialist perspective.

The second speaker, Morgan Peach is a leading member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the SEP's youth and students wing. Peach explained that the same Labor government spearheading the attack on construction workers, was also supporting the Israeli genocide in Gaza. As part of that, Labor had overseen a wave of repression against protesters and university students opposing the war crimes.

The two issues were linked, Peach said. The turn to war was not isolated to Gaza. It included Labor's support for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and its transformation of Australia into a frontline state for a catastrophic war against China. This program could only be enforced through dictatorial measures.

Peach stressed the need for students and youth to turn to the working class, the revolutionary force in society with the social power to end war, authoritarianism and their source, the capitalist system. This meant a political fight against Labor, the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left groups, who over the previous year had subordinated opposition to the genocide to feckless appeals to the government.

The final report was delivered by SEP National Secretary Cheryl Crisp. The attack on construction workers, Crisp explained, was taking place as "Mankind has once again reached what can only be called an economic, social, and political precipice characterised by financial crisis, the turn to extreme right-wing, fascist forms of rule and war."

The world was at war, Crisp said, expressed in the Israeli strikes on Iran, the barbarism inflicted on the Palestinians and the US-led offensive against Russia and China, all of which were supported by the Labor government. The old nominally democratic forms of rule were breaking down, expressed most sharply in this month's US presidential election, contested between Donald Trump, a fascist gangster, and Kamala Harris, whose main policy is world war.

Reviewing the implementation of administration by Labor and the CFMEU's refusal to fight it, Crisp stated: "The blueprint for this action was actually carried out almost 40 years ago in 1986 when the Hawke/Keating Labor government deregistered the Builders Laborers Federation, [BLF] the forerunner of the CFMEU."

That had been a key element of the Accords, implemented in the 1980s by the Labor government with big business and the trade union bureaucracy. BLF leader Norm Gallagher was released from jail on contempt charges to attend the Accord conferences and vote for it, playing a central role in its passing. The Accord agenda entailed the smashing up of shop stewards committees, the disciplining of workers and the destruction of whole sections of industry deemed insufficiently profitable, all in the interests of boosting the profits of Australian capitalism.

As the CFMEU leadership was acceding to administration today, Gallagher suppressed any struggle against the deregistration of the BLF then. The unions had always defended capitalism, but the 1980s marked a turning point. They were "transformed into the open policeman of the working class in the interests of capitalism. The backroom deals, agreements and conspiracies performed behind the backs of their members are designed to ensure the

working class does not embark on an independent political and socialist road."

But that was precisely the perspective needed to halt the deepening barbarism, Crisp emphasised, calling on workers to study the lessons of history and join the SEP.

That path was concretely outlined in the discussion period by two longstanding SEP members.

Ken Mantell recounted his experiences, fighting as a member of the Socialist Labour League, predecessor of the SEP, against the deregistration of the BLF, of which he was a member. Mantell outlined the treachery of the various union leaders at the time, most affiliated with one or another wing of Stalinism. All of them defended capitalism, and so sought to prevent any mobilisation by workers against the sweeping attacks of the 1980s.

Mantell outlined a mass meeting at which he spoke, in defiance of attempts to suppress him by the union bureaucracy. The overwhelming majority of the more than 1,800 workers in attendance had voted for a motion put by Mantell, calling for a movement of the working-class against the deregistration of the BLF and the Accords, and outlining a revolutionary socialist program, including the nationalisation of the banks and the major corporations. That had refuted, Mantell said, all those who claimed that Australian workers were too backward to be won to a socialist perspective.

Warwick Dove, another working-class member, who is on the SEP's National Committee, also reviewed his experiences in the metal industry, fighting for a socialist perspective in the 1980s and ever since. The key lesson, he emphasised, was that anger and determination were not sufficient. There had been mass opposition to the Accords, but in the absence of political understanding and still under the dominance of the union bureaucracy, workers had been unable to defeat the onslaught.

Workers needed new organisations of struggle, to coordinate their fight. But above all, what they needed was the socialist and internationalist perspective, based on a scientific understanding that workers are in a fight with capitalism and all those political forces that defend it.



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