

Australia: Build rank-and-file committees to fight Labor's attack on construction workers and the entire working class!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)

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Eleven weeks have passed since the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) was placed under quasi-dictatorial administration by the federal Labor government.

This was an extraordinary attack on building workers' basic industrial rights, limited though they already were by draconian anti-strike laws. Workers' capacity to defend their jobs, wages and conditions now rests with a hand-picked lawyer who answers only to the corporations, courts and the government.

The entire capitalist state is arrayed against the CFMEU and the 80,000 building workers it claims to represent. The Australian Federal Police is conducting multiple investigations in collaboration with the administrator. The Fair Work Ombudsman has 23 active investigations into CFMEU officials.

However, construction workers are the real target. The purpose of administration is to drive down their wages and conditions, in an offensive that will set a precedent for attacks on every section of workers.

Defeating administration is therefore an existential question for building workers and the whole working class. In that context, what is even more striking than the attack itself is the refusal of the ousted CFMEU leaders and their allies in the other building industry unions to organise any serious fight against it.

In almost three months, just two token days of protest have been held. This week, workers in Sydney will rally for a third time, but in complete isolation from their counterparts elsewhere in the country.

This is particularly stark in Victoria, which has the largest number of construction union members and where attendance at previous rallies was strongest. Widely supported plans for a possible three-day strike in that state were quietly dropped last month, apparently based on a promise from the Master Builders Association to uphold the existing CFMEU enterprise agreement.

This is completely out of step with the substantial opposition of workers to the administration, demonstrated by the tens of thousands who turned out for the rallies in August and September.

This underscores the need for building workers to take matters into their own hands.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the establishment of rank-and-file committees at all major worksites and throughout the industry as the means by which workers can organise to fight for

their own needs and rights. These committees must be democratically led by workers and independent from the CFMEU and all other unions, which are no longer workers' organisations in any sense, but serve as a police force of governments and corporations.

In the first instance, rank-and-file committees must prepare a campaign of strikes and other action demanding the removal of the administrator and the repeal of the latest draconian legislation. Any attempt by employers to tear up, modify or circumvent existing agreements should be answered with indefinite stoppages.

Rank-and-file committees must fight to win support from the widest layers of workers. Even within the construction industry, many workers on non-union sites are not aware of what Labor has carried out. These workers are just as much a target of the attack on wages and conditions as those in the CFMEU and it is critical that, through rank-and-file committees, they are brought into the struggle against it.

More broadly, this means exposing the filthy role played by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and most unions in the country, which have given their full support to Labor's imposition of administration.

The complicity of these organisations in the harshest attack on a section of the Australian working class for decades reveals as a total fraud their claim to represent their members. A union bureaucracy that cheers on the evisceration of workplace democratic rights is signalling that it will enforce attacks on jobs, wages and conditions everywhere.

Indeed, the largest unions in the country, covering health workers and educators, have played the leading role in imposing the austerity agenda of state and federal Labor governments in recent years, delivering one real wage cut after another, despite the opposition of workers.

This poses the need for a unified struggle against this broader assault spearheaded by Labor. That is anathema to the union bureaucracies, which seek to keep workers divided and isolated, industry by industry, workplace by workplace.

Strikes and rallies, in and of themselves, will not defeat this attack, but their significance is expressed in the hostile response to this week's rally from the lackeys appointed by the administrator to run the CFMEU in NSW.

In a letter to all members, they threatened that workers who

attended the “unauthorised rally” did so “at risk of losing their job.” The letter urged workers to wait on the outcome of a High Court challenge to the laws the Labor government rushed through parliament in August to enable administration.

This effort was launched by the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy as a political diversion to turn workers away from the need to fight Labor’s attack directly. In the unlikely event that the case succeeds, the government can simply change the law again.

It is no surprise that the administrator’s representatives are trying to undermine the rally. What is notable is how neatly their position dovetails with that of the current and former building industry union officials around the country who posture as opponents of administration.

Instead of action by workers, the CFMEU “leadership-in-exile” is promoting illusions that workers’ rights can be restored and wages and conditions defended through state mechanisms like the High Court case.

Equally bankrupt are claims from sections of the bureaucracy that administration can be fought through parliamentary means, whether direct appeals to Labor and the Greens, calls for workers to join Labor en masse, or the formation of a “blue-collar” rival to the ACTU to exert pressure through political donations.

What underlies all of this is that the construction union bureaucrats have only ever opposed the attack on building workers insofar as it affects their own highly paid positions. This is why there was no call for strikes in the six weeks before the legislation was passed, as CFMEU officials engaged in backroom negotiations with Labor, the ACTU and the Fair Work Commission to impose administration in a way that kept them in a key role.

Only after they were sacked were the first strike rallies organised. These were not directed at defending the rights of workers but restoring the privileges of the ousted leaders.

The exemplar is Zach Smith, who remains national secretary of the CFMEU, one of the few high-ranking officials kept on by the administrator. Now running the Victorian branch as a foot soldier of the administrator, Smith insists that building workers can carry on with “business as usual,” as if nothing had happened.

Providing political cover for the CFMEU bureaucracy are the pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alliance, which have helped to establish the falsely named “Rank & File: Hands off the CFMEU” group.

This group is not a rank-and-file organisation at all, but one that is collaborating with the CFMEU bureaucracy which has approved its creation and authorised its activities. Its purpose is to capture workers who, driven by the betrayals and complicity of the union leaders, are looking for an independent way forward in the political trap of appeals to the union apparatus and the Labor government.

In recent weeks, the pseudo-left groups have denounced the substantial payments being made to ACTU- and Labor-affiliated staff appointed by the administrator, but they are silent on the massive salaries enjoyed in every industry by the union bureaucrats that they consistently promote and defend.

This is because the pseudo-left organisations do not represent the working class or fight for socialism. They speak for a layer of the

upper middle-class which pursues its own privileges within capitalism, and is tied by a thousand threads to the political establishment, particularly Labor and the union officialdom.

The pseudo-left’s phoney “rank-and-file” group is directed against the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. While this group operates with the blessing of CFMEU officials, SEP campaigners have been threatened and accosted by supporters of the ousted leadership when speaking to workers at building sites in Melbourne.

The SEP is fighting for a real rank-and-file movement and a rebellion against both the current and former CFMEU leadership. This means establishing genuine rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to this bureaucracy. Such committees must be controlled by workers themselves, not the privileged bureaucrats and their hangers-on.

To defeat administration and take up a fight for real improvements to wages and conditions in the building industry and more broadly, workers need to understand what they are up against.

Labor’s attack on the CFMEU is the sharpest expression in Australia of a global assault on workers by the ruling class, as the escalating crisis of capitalism toboggans towards world war.

This underscores the need for a unified political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system and its subordination of every aspect of workers’ lives to the profits of the financial and corporate elite.

Above all, what is posed is the need to fight for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies. The big builders and developers, as well as the banks and other major corporations, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control so that society’s resources can be utilised to provide the social needs of the working people, not increase the immense wealth of the financial and corporate elite.

The SEP is committed to providing every political assistance to workers to form rank-and-file committees. Contact us today to discuss how you can take up this initiative in your workplace.



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