

Australian unions promote Labor at May Day rally

Martin Scott
2 May 2025

More than 1,000 Sydney workers, primarily from the building industry and ports, walked off the job Thursday to participate in a May Day rally held by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and several other unions.

Hundreds of construction workers attended, defying the admonitions of the administrator of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

Construction workers were told by the government-appointed leadership they had no right to strike and could be penalised by their employers if they took part in the rally.

The CFMEU May Day ban was a stark reminder that the administration, imposed by the federal Labor government last August, is aimed at smashing workers' democratic rights and suppressing the class struggle, throughout the building industry and more broadly.

On the basis of vague and mostly untested claims of corruption in the CFMEU leadership, the Labor government placed the entire construction division of the union under quasi-dictatorial control, in a clear bid to intensify the assault on wages and conditions.

Under these conditions, and with a federal poll to be held Saturday, what was most notable about the speeches by union officials was how little they had to say about the election. This was especially stark given that the rally was bordered on one side by New South Wales (NSW) Parliament and on the other by a pre-polling booth.

The bureaucrats were clearly concerned how workers might respond to open promotion of the very Labor government that has carried out the most blatant attack on workers' democratic rights in decades, presided over a deepening assault on wages and living standards, and which is complicit in Israel's genocide in Gaza, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and US-led preparations for war against China.

They could not openly discuss the election, because to do so would require an explanation of why, under these conditions, the unions continue to back the Albanese government, when Labor has spent the past three years

demonstrating its pedigree as a pro-war, big-business party that is totally hostile to the working class.

Several speakers denounced the administrator's attempt to prevent building workers from attending the rally. ETU NSW secretary Michael Wright described it as "an absolute f..king disgrace." But there was a marked attempt to cover over the federal Labor government's responsibility for the administration and paint this as a NSW-specific issue.

The fact is, there was no need for the CFMEU administrators or anyone else to ban workers from walking off the job in other states, as the union bureaucracy organised their May Day events in the evening or over the weekend, outside normal working hours.

While speakers, including Wright, referenced the need to "get rid of" the administrator, not a word was spoken about how this might be accomplished. Conspicuously absent was the bluster, empty as it always was, of building industry rallies last August. Then, Labor politicians were labelled "traitors of the working class," speakers declared "next election, we're gonna vote these bastards out," and union officials vowed to "campaign for the absolute destruction of the Labor Party."

This hyperbole was replaced on Thursday with the bankrupt call for workers to "put [Liberal-National Party leader Peter] Dutton last." Within the capitalist parliamentary framework, this can only mean one thing—whatever you do, preference Labor above the Coalition.

The basis for this, expressed by plumbers union official Chris Seet, was that "if the Liberal Party gets in they're not just going to screw us over, they're going to bury us."

Specifically, Seet was referring to Dutton's threat to deregister the CFMEU. This course of action was considered by the Albanese government last year, but rejected because Labor and sections of big business believed that maintaining the union framework, albeit under state control, was the best means of suppressing the class struggle among building workers.

There is no question that the deregistration of the

construction union would be a massive attack on building workers and the working class as a whole. But the conditions for a Coalition government to do so have been created by Labor's imposition of administration, and, moreover, by the complicity of the union apparatus.

This includes the majority of unions, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which gave full-throated support for the administration. But it also includes the ousted CFMEU officials and their cronies in the other building industry unions, who posture as opponents of the measure, but have suppressed any fight by workers against it.

This is for two reasons: First, the sole preoccupation of the sacked bureaucrats was and remains the restoration of their own privileged and highly paid positions, gained by imposing decades of sell-out union-management deals. Second, they recognised the explosive potential of an industrial fight against the Labor-imposed administration, which would have quickly and necessarily assumed broader political dimensions.

The bureaucrats are intensely aware of mounting hostility to Labor in the working class, on a far broader range of issues than the administration alone. This was reflected, albeit in limited and distorted fashion, in several of the speeches on Thursday.

MUA Sydney secretary Paul Keating referred to US President Donald Trump and the need for workers to "reject" the re-emergence of fascism "around the world including here." Keating name-checked "socialism," and declared "we can't fix a system that exploits us." But he said not a word about how fascism could be fought, and is campaigning on social media for the election of a Labor government.

Denis McNamara, who served on the CFMEU's committee of management until he was removed by the administrator, declared: "Our government is a collaborator of the US and other imperialists. This means that Australian workers are not safe.

"We need to oppose any war effort by the Australian government," he continued, stating that "class consciousness among workers and unity of all workers are the keys to prevent war." McNamara also spoke of the need for workers to "stand with Palestinians against Israel's genocide."

The truth is that the unions are just as complicit as the Labor government and all the capitalist parties. Since October 7, 2023, the Australian union apparatus has prevented any industrial action by workers against the genocide, under conditions of mass working-class support for the Palestinians, demonstrated in more than a year of weekly protests.

MUA officials, including Keating, expressed violent hostility to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members, in

November 2023, when they so much as asked whether the organisation would uphold the call by Palestinian unions to block all potential military related shipments to Israel. Since then, Keating and the MUA have made sure that ships of the Israeli ZIM line, which has publicly dedicated its entire fleet to aiding the mass murder of Palestinian civilians, come and go, load and unload, without the slightest hindrance.

The record is clear. Keating and the MUA are flunkies of Labor, of the Zionist regime and bitter opponents of the fight to mobilise the working class against fascism, genocide and war. Bureaucrats who will aid the Israeli war machine will not fight fascism; if it were to be victorious, they would assist it too.

The bureaucrats on Thursday paid lip service to the deepening global crisis and employed their hollow scraps of pseudo-left phraseology for a definite political purpose—to keep workers' burgeoning opposition to fascism, genocide and war trapped within the control of the union bureaucracy and ultimately, its ally in the Labor government. Above all, they are desperate to prevent the development of a unified political struggle of workers against Labor and the political establishment.

This is because the union officials are not just supporters, but integral components of the Labor Party and its governments. Tightly integrated into finance capital, they serve as an industrial police force, enforcing the job and wage-slashing demands of management, and defending the capitalist system from any challenge by the working class.

That is why the SEP is campaigning for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy. We call for these committees to join with the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, a means to unite the struggles of workers worldwide, who all confront the growing threat of world war, as well as deepening attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

Above all, the working class needs its own mass socialist party, independent from and opposed to all the capitalist parties. That is what the SEP is fighting to build.

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