

Labor's attack on the CFMEU: 1 year under state control

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A report was tabled in parliament last week on the first year of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) operating under quasi-dictatorial state control. It spells out, more plainly than ever, that the federal Labor government's appointment of administrator Mark Irving was always aimed at facilitating deeper cuts to wages and conditions in the building industry and more broadly.

On August 23, 2024, Irving was handed total control of the industrial interests of the CFMEU construction division's around 80,000 members. As the first step in Labor's unprecedented attack on workers' democratic rights, hundreds of elected officials and delegates were immediately removed from their roles.

This was carried out under the pretext of stamping out alleged corruption and links to organised crime within the union, based on unsubstantiated claims contained in a trumped-up media campaign by the Nine Entertainment newspapers.

The government, the media and the construction companies have had a year to provide evidence of their assertions of a vast criminal enterprise throughout the CFMEU. But they have proven absolutely nothing.

Instead, the initial pretext has substantially fallen away. Low-level CFMEU organisers along with leaders of the organisation have been targeted by the administrators, not on the grounds of any allegation of criminal wrongdoing, but in an increasingly transparent purge aimed at refashioning the union.

This was particularly stark in the May ouster of Australian Capital Territory acting branch secretary Michael Hiscox, who was not accused of corruption, but removed from his post ostensibly due to a decline in membership numbers. In fact, his sacking was an obvious retaliation to his criticism of the restructure plan proposed by Irving and national secretary Zach Smith.

In his report, Irving declares "the Union has stabilised." By that he means that large swathes of elected officials, delegates and organisers, along with 4 percent of the rank-and-file membership, have been driven out of the union, and control of day-to-day operations of all the state branches has been increasingly concentrated in the national office.

As Irving writes, "almost all of the legal power to conduct the Union and its business is in my hands." He has appointed hand-picked executive officers to run the branches in every state and territory except Western Australia (WA). These unelected officials also serve, with Irving, Smith and WA secretary Mick Buchan, on a newly established National Steering Committee, which is

preparing to preside over a major restructuring operation.

Irving notes that more than 75 percent of organisers in New South Wales (NSW), and around 50 percent in Queensland and South Australia, have been replaced since August 2024, including by "experienced organisers from other Unions." This is significant, because almost all unions, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), have given their full-throated support to the administration from the outset.

In other words, union officials that endorsed the most blatant government attack on the democratic rights of workers in decades are now being installed to "represent" those workers.

Irving refers in particular to the High Court's June dismissal of a legal challenge to the Administration brought by "dissidents"—that is, the sacked leadership of the Queensland branch—as a significant milestone, allowing the "Administration to move to its next phase."

This "phase" will be one of stepped-up collaboration with big business and government. Irving notes that, when administration was imposed, "the tripartite National Construction Industry Forum (NCIF) recognised an unprecedented opportunity to collaboratively address the key challenges facing the construction industry."

In other words, the NCIF, comprising representatives of the major property developers, as well as the building industry unions and the federal Labor government, saw that the smashing up of the CFMEU would clear the way for a deeper attack on workers' wages and conditions. Chief among these "key challenges" are "productivity"—that is, extracting ever greater profits from workers' labour—and "workplace relations."

The NCIF's "Blueprint for the future" laments that "Over the year to December 2024, there were 43.2 working days lost [to strikes] per 1,000 employees in the construction industry compared to 10.5 in all industries," and that, over the past decade, the industry has had the second highest rate of strikes.

The concern is not only the current stoppages, which remain at historically low levels, but the prospect that deteriorating conditions will spark far greater struggles.

But the aims of the "collaborative tripartite body" do not end with shutting down strikes. The NCIF Blueprint notes that "industrial arrangements can be a point of conflict" and proposes several measures to eliminate the "adversarial relationship" between workers and management in enterprise bargaining.

Central to these would be the greater involvement of the Fair

Work Commission, as well as state industrial tribunals, to facilitate back-room “interest-based” bargaining, abandoning even the pretence of union bureaucrats going up against management to fight for a log of workers’ claims. Instead, enterprise agreements, and therefore workers’ pay and conditions, would be determined according to the profit objectives of the company.

These plans, part of a broader “productivity” offensive by the big-business Labor government, are by no means limited to workers covered by the under-administration CFMEU. The NCIF Blueprint was jointly endorsed by senior bureaucrats from the Australian Workers Union (AWU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Plumbing and Pipe Trade Employees Union and Electrical Trades Union, as well as the CFMEU.

With the exception of the AWU, the NCIF signatories are the same bureaucracies that last year postured as opponents of the administration, co-organising mass rallies, entertaining the possibility of industry-wide strikes and briefly even threatening a split with Labor and the ACTU.

These actions, aimed at containing the immense anger among building workers over administration, stand exposed as a fraudulent pantomime, which was dropped by the bureaucrats.

When Irving notes that the administration no longer has to operate in the “shadow” of the High Court case, what he is really celebrating is the collapse of any semblance of organised opposition to the anti-democratic regime.

Since September last year, the legal challenge had been promoted to workers by the ousted bureaucracy and their pseudo-left supporters as the means through which the administration could be defeated. This was primarily a smokescreen, used to shut down mass protests by workers opposing not just the administration, but the Labor government and the ACTU.

The High Court ruling was immediately followed by several days of work stoppages and protests—in Queensland only—expressing in limited form the strong current of opposition that still exists among building workers. But these were quickly brought under control. Having failed to restore their privileged positions through legal machinations, the ousted CFMEU bureaucrats quickly left the scene, leaving workers in the hands of the administrator.

This confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned from the outset: The fight against the administration cannot be left to the sacked CFMEU officials or their bureaucratic cronies in the other building unions. Their interest was only ever to restore the status quo ante, in which their power, privileges and salaries were a direct product of their role as industrial police, enforcing the demands of big business through the suppression of the class struggle.

A year on, this is more clear than ever. Every section of the Australian union apparatus has either openly endorsed the federal government’s takeover of the CFMEU, or conspired to help shut down opposition to it. By their actions, the union bureaucrats have demonstrated that they are enemies of the working class, who stand on the other side of the barricades.

A struggle against administration is only conceivable through a rank-and-file rebellion against this entire bureaucracy, including the current and former CFMEU leadership. This means

establishing rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, on job sites and in workplaces throughout the country.

These committees would prepare a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive against the administration and the assault on jobs and wages that it was always aimed at implementing.

Such a struggle must be based on a political understanding of the significance of Labor’s imposition of administration.

This was not primarily an attack on the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy, but on construction workers themselves and the working class as a whole. The aim was and is to discipline a historically militant section of the working class, whose labour powers a central component of the economy.

By restricting the wages and conditions of construction workers, Labor is seeking to drive down the pay of all workers. And by imposing police-state measures on this powerful section of the working class, it is establishing a precedent for repressive actions directed against all others.

The administration is inseparable from the broader agenda of the Labor government and the ruling elite.

They are seeking to enforce a dramatic reversal to working-class conditions and a major increase to productivity, i.e., exploitation, amid a slump in the Australian and world economy, and a massive increase in military spending.

That increase is aimed at preparing for war, under conditions where the imperialist powers have already set the world aflame, with the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the US-Israeli genocide of Palestinians and strikes against Iran and the plans for war against China in the Indo-Pacific.

Labor is a participant in all of the wars that are underway, and has completed Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for the disastrous conflict with China that is being prepared.

War is incompatible with democratic rights. It requires the ever more direct subordination of the working class to the state, to suppress current and potential future opposition. That is the significance, both of Labor’s crackdown on mass opposition to the Gaza genocide and its assault on construction workers.

The union bureaucracies are central partners of the Labor government on all of these fronts, backing the productivity offensive, suppressing strikes and tacitly or openly promoting the military build-up.

The fight against administration must form a crucial component of a broader struggle to build an independent movement of the working class, directed against the entire political establishment and its program of war, austerity and dictatorship. That is a fight against the capitalist system itself, which is tearing up the rights and conditions of the working class as it threatens to plunge humanity into the abyss of world war.



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