

SEP demands the dropping of charges against McArthur Express workers

By Chris Gordon and Socialist Equality Party candidate for Parramatta
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands the dropping of the charges against the two young workers arrested by riot police during a protest over the closure of the McArthur Express transport company in the Sydney suburb of Seven Hills on September 26.

Anthony Coenradi and Andrew Moore face up to 10 years in prison for the “crime” of fighting for basic rights after the company’s sudden liquidation, which saw around 700 people being thrown out of work without any notice or entitlements. The young men have been charged with some of the most serious charges in the Crimes Act—affray and “intimidating a police officer”. (See “McArthur Express workers face up to 10 years jail for protesting”)

The fact that it was a state Labor government that sent in more than 30 people, including riot squad personnel, the dog squad and undercover detectives, against a small group of workers and their families should not pass unnoticed.

The police-state response occurred in the marginal seat of Parramatta—which Labor is fighting to hold—on the eve of the federal election. Labor state Premier Morris Iemma authorised the attack in order to send a clear message to the McArthur Express workers that no resistance to the destruction of their jobs would be tolerated.

The scope of the police mobilisation was likewise designed to send a reassuring message to big business that the entire party—including the state Labor governments—was committed to Kevin Rudd’s pledge to employers that a federal Labor government would maintain a “zero tolerance” approach to industrial action.

That is why Labor’s candidate for Parramatta, Julie Owens, and Roger Price for the neighbouring seat of Chifley, have said nothing about the affair in the course of the election campaign. Even more revealingly, the trade union organisations—the Transport Workers Union

(TWU), Unions NSW and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) have also kept their mouths tightly shut.

For all the rhetoric of their “Your Rights at Work” election campaign, when 700 workers are thrown out of a job, and subjected to violent attacks by riot police, the unions refuse to condemn the company, the police and the government that deployed them. The unions have abandoned not only the workers who have been charged, but any struggle to defend the jobs, conditions and democratic rights of the entire McArthur Express workforce.

Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the real content of the Labor/union campaign: to subordinate the working class to the election of a Rudd government, which will move immediately, with the assistance of the unions, to deepen the assault on jobs and living standards that was ferociously implemented under the last Labor governments of Hawke and Keating.

The McArthur Express closure is a clear example of how the Howard government’s “WorkChoices” laws operate. The company acted with impunity to carry out the mass sackings, having secretly rearranged its corporate structure to evade all legal liability. In this way, the banks and financial institutions have been able to reap the benefits.

Under a Rudd Labor government nothing will change. Rudd has pledged to maintain until 2011 all Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) that workers have been forced to sign. After that employers will be allowed to impose individual contracts.

The role that Labor and the unions have played in the McArthur Express episode reveals the real character of their relations with the working class. For years, they have worked hand-in-glove with employers and receivers to convince workers of the futility of challenging mass retrenchments. According to the unions, all workers can

do is appeal for payouts under redundancy or government compensation schemes. Plant after plant has been shut down, with the unions ensuring one “orderly closure” after another.

McArthur Express, however, was a non-union plant. That meant there was no trade union on hand to immediately divert rank-and-file anger back into safe official channels. Left to their own devices, a group of sacked workers entered the McArthur Express depot to seek information and termination documents.

That is when the Labor government moved to send in the police. Not long after, the industrial police force turned up to ensure things did not get out of hand. TWU officials descended on the scene—but not to support the workers, or to organise an industrial or political campaign to defend their jobs and entitlements, or to demand the dropping of the charges or to take any action against the Labor government’s use of the riot squad.

Instead, TWU organisers came armed with letters from the administrators, Ferrier Hodgson, urging the sacked employees to appoint the TWU as their proxy to represent their interests. Clearly the liquidators had called them in to secure yet another “orderly closure”—even though none of the sacked workers was a union member.

The TWU officials told the workers and their families there was nothing they could do except apply for assistance from the Howard government’s General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS), plead with the government to extend the scheme to cover the owner-drivers, and look for work elsewhere. As part of its pitch, the TWU said it would write to the police to ask for the charges against Coenradi and Moore to be reconsidered due to “extenuating circumstances”.

The sole purpose of the TWU’s actions was to disperse the workers as quickly as possible and prevent any struggle from erupting that could raise embarrassing questions for the Labor party in the middle of an election campaign.

The results have been predictable. The Howard government’s workplace relations minister Joe Hockey refused to make GEERS payments to any of the owner-drivers. And a month after the sackings, by the TWU’s own admission, only 11 out of 400 of the eligible employees had been paid any monies under GEERS.

Likewise, when Coenradi and Moore attended their first hearing at Blacktown Local Court on October 17, police said nothing had been heard from the TWU, and no union official was present. The two young men later went to the

union office, where they demanded that a letter be sent to the police, but court officials have confirmed that the charges are still proceeding.

The SEP is standing candidates in the federal election to fight for an alternative socialist perspective to the program of job destruction, casualisation and attacks on the living standards of ordinary working people that is being advanced and implemented by both Labor and Liberal. We are making clear that the most decisive issue is for workers to make a conscious political break with the Labor Party and its accomplices in the trade unions, and to strike out on a new road—the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass party of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

To defend Coenradi and Moore, working people need to take independent action. The fate of these two workers cannot be left in the hands of the same trade unions that have systematically isolated the McArthur Express workforce. The SEP urges all workers and young people to send letters to the NSW Police Commissioner and Police Minister demanding the dropping of the charges.

Messages can be sent to NSW Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione, Locked Bag 5102 Parramatta NSW 2124 or www.police.nsw.gov.au/contact_us and to Police Minister David Campbell, GPO Box 5341 Sydney NSW 2001, or david@campbell.minister.nsw.gov.au, with a copy to the Socialist Equality Party, sep@sep.org.au.

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