

Australian maritime union in talks with Hutchison to impose cost-cutting

By Mike Head
18 August 2015

Just four days after betraying a week-long struggle by Hutchison Ports workers in Sydney and Brisbane against sackings, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) were entering “high-level meetings” with the global conglomerate today on how to enforce the company’s demands for deep cuts to jobs and conditions.

Last Friday, the MUA instructed its members to return to work, falsely telling them that a temporary Federal Court injunction obtained by the union “protected” the jobs of the 97 workers sacked by the company via late-night emails a week earlier.

Far from “protecting” the jobs of the sacked workers—half Hutchison’s Australian container terminal workforce—the court ruling specified that the company was not obliged to allow any of them back on the docks. All the sacked workers would receive was base rate pay for two weeks until the court reconvened.

The only “victory” was one for the union bureaucracy, which initiated the court case to pursue two objectives. The first was to demobilise the Hutchison workers, who defied two return-to-work orders by the federal government’s Fair Work Commission, so that the MUA could safely negotiate with the company, behind closed doors, to deliver the cost-cutting that it demanded.

In a media release yesterday, the MUA celebrated the “pleasing” fact that Hutchison agreed to hold “formal talks.” MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin said the union wanted to help provide a “long term solution” that would “find a way through current circumstances.”

Crumlin pledged to keep assisting the company, as the MUA has done since Hutchison, one of the world’s largest container terminal operators, acquired Australian port berths in 2012. “We have worked closely with senior Hutchison management in recent years to ensure productive, flexible, safe and reliable working arrangements which allowed the company to enter into Australia’s highly competitive market,” he said.

According to the media release, the MUA leader has even contacted Hutchison’s clients to promise that the union will

deliver the lower labour costs necessary to make the company’s operations commercially viable, that is, sufficiently profitable. “Mr Crumlin in his capacity as International Transport Workers’ Federation President has been speaking to Hutchison’s customers assuring them of the MUA’s determination to conclude a mutually agreed outcome that will secure long-term stability,” it stated.

Crumlin emphasised that the MUA sent its members back to work, “under difficult circumstances as a gesture of good faith in resolving this dispute.” In other words, behind all the lies about a “win” for workers that “protected” their jobs, Crumlin wanted to make clear to Hutchison and its corporate customers that the union was determined to enforce their requirements, whatever the MUA’s “difficulties” in getting its members to accept the sacrifices involved.

This must sound the alarm for dockworkers. For the MUA to make Hutchison “competitive” will mean matching the current halving of the workforces at its two main Australian rivals, Asciano and DP World. Asciano recently introduced robot cranes to its Sydney terminal, prompting a now-accepted \$12 billion takeover offer from a consortium backed by US- and Canadian-listed Brookfield Infrastructure Partners, which is headquartered in Bermuda, a tax haven.

The second objective of the MUA, in collaboration with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Labor Party, was to prevent the seven-day stoppage from becoming a catalyst for a wider revolt by workers, on the waterfront and across basic industry, against the escalating decades-long assault on jobs, wages and basic conditions.

The Hutchison confrontation worsened a deepening crisis of Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government, which initially backed Hutchison’s late-night sackings, then declared that the company’s “communication methods” inflamed the situation. In effect, the government relied upon the trade union movement to shut down the strike.

The day after securing the Federal Court ruling, Crumlin and ACTU president Ged Kearney issued a joint media

release saying they would meet with the strikers to discuss returning to work under the injunction that “protects their jobs.” Kearney went to Sydney’s Port Botany docks to help Crumlin overcome any rank and file opposition to the betrayal.

For more than three decades, especially since the “accords” between the ACTU and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, the ACTU has functioned as the chief industrial policing agency of the working class, suppressing opposition to countless mass sackings, closures and reversals of hard-won working conditions—all in the name of making Australian capitalism “globally competitive.”

This latest partnership between the MUA and the ACTU is another direct parallel with the union movement’s betrayal of the six-week 1998 Australian waterfront confrontation. That dispute erupted after Patrick Stevedoring axed its entire workforce and replaced it with scab labour. The sackings provoked widespread anger in the working class, resulting in sustained, and at times large, pickets of the company’s terminals despite the attempts of the ACTU and the MUA to contain the popular response.

The ACTU banned support industrial action by oil workers, miners and other key sections of the working class. It pushed the dispute into the courts, then shut down the strike and the pickets, after the High Court ordered the reinstatement of the sacked workers and Patrick called in the MUA to negotiate a deal.

The resulting agreement, which became a benchmark for the entire waterfront, delivered the company’s demands. Almost half its 1,400-strong workforce was axed, core conditions were cut and massive speed-ups imposed. Over the ensuing 17 years, the MUA has worked closely with the employers to halve their average labour costs, at the expense of dockworkers’ jobs, permanency and conditions.

A pivotal role in that betrayal was played by Greg Combet, the then ACTU assistant secretary, who had been an official of the Waterside Workers Federation (which later became the MUA) from 1987 to 1993. Combet reportedly masterminded the decision to use the courts to call off the struggle.

For his services, Combet was elevated to ACTU secretary in 2000. In that post, he helped divert deep working-class opposition to the Howard Liberal-National government’s WorkChoices industrial laws into a campaign to elect the pro-business Labor Party at the 2007 federal election.

At that election, Combet was parachuted into a “safe” Labor Party seat in parliament. He was quickly promoted to a succession of key ministerial posts. As industry minister under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, he oversaw a wave of corporate restructuring and plant closures.

When Combet retired from parliament in 2013, the MUA’s Crumlin and Tony Maher, president of the Mining and Energy Division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), issued a joint statement paying tribute to his part in the 1998 sellout.

“As ACTU Assistant Secretary he played a critical leadership role in the 1998 Patrick dispute on the waterfront, distinguishing his involvement through a combination of intelligence and strategic capacity together with a passion and extraordinary commitment to community and labour values,” Crumlin and Maher stated.

The two union bosses declared: “Working Australians could hardly have had a better friend, ally and advocate in the halls of power than Greg Combet. His decision to leave government is a great loss to the nation and to the union movement.”

This tribute to Combet, an honorary life member of the MUA, speaks volumes about the political perspective of the entire Labor and union bureaucracy, in which the MUA occupies a key place. It is to totally subordinate workers to the dictates of the financial and corporate elite, while fraudulently claiming to defend their interests.

It is time for dockworkers, and all workers, to call a halt to the endless litany of union and Labor treachery. That means breaking from the unions, forming rank-and-file committees to resume the waterfront strike, and calling on workers from DP World and Asciano to participate. It means turning out to all layers of workers to join in, as well as Hutchison and other dockworkers around the world.

As is clear from the 1998 betrayal, this is a fight not only against the employers but the unions, the Labor leaders and the entire political establishment. To win secure jobs and decent living standards, the working class must overturn the corporate profit system itself. What is required is a socialist perspective—the fight for a workers’ government that will nationalise the ports, together with the banks and other basic industries, under democratic workers’ control.

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