

Australian maritime union betrays Hutchison workers

By Richard Phillips
18 November 2015

After months of secret backroom negotiations with Hutchison Ports senior management, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) pushed through a sell-out deal at mass meetings of Hutchison workers in Brisbane and at Port Botany in Sydney on Monday.

The agreement, which has been praised by the global stevedoring corporation, is a betrayal of Hutchison workers who took determined week-long strike action from August 7 to fight the sacking of 97 waterside workers, or over half the company's total Australian container workforce, via text messages.

The workers defied two Fair Work Commission return-to-work orders and were winning significant support before the MUA shut down the strike and split the workforce on August 14. Falsely claiming that all employees had been reinstated, the union rushed into cost-cutting negotiations with Hutchison. The sacked workers, however, were not reinstated but put on basic pay and banned from entering container terminals.

The MUA has cynically declared that this Monday's agreement is a "victory." The only winners, however, are Hutchison Ports, which has axed jobs and operating costs, and the MUA, which has maintained its role as the company's labour-broker and enforcer of management demands.

Precise details on the sell-out agreement have not been officially announced but at least 65 jobs will be destroyed and the official working-week extended from 30 to 32 hours, reducing overtime and cutting take-home pay. Other measures include the introduction of casuals.

The cost-cutting will be implemented through a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) and an "enhanced voluntary redundancy" package. Those taking redundancy will receive 26 weeks' pay—20 weeks more than in the previous agreement—with the

possible option of being rehired in the unlikely event that container-handling volumes increase. Anyone rehired, however, will be employed on casual rates.

Hutchison Ports acting chief executive Mark Jack praised the union on Monday for its efforts and said the new EBA allowed the "conversion of full-time employees to casuals," which would help Hutchison "manage its significant costs in a difficult environment, providing the company with greatly enhanced flexibility."

Jack indicated that the union-brokered deal could be followed by further cost cutting and the possible sale or closure of its facilities. The situation, he said, "remained challenging" and the company was "actively monitoring the environment and considering all options to ensure its ongoing viability."

MUA assistant secretary Warren Smith told the media: "We can now move forward with Hutchison in a way that can underpin getting their business back on its feet." His remarks simply underscore the fact that the union's primary concern is to ensure the company's profits.

Smith claimed that the sell-out agreement had "achieved justice" and represented a "victory" and "a step forward for workers."

This is reality turned on its head. The destruction of over 60 jobs, the introduction of a longer working week and loss of pay are presented as a "victory." The further casualisation of the workforce is declared to be a step forward for workers. In fact, it is a retrogression—a backward step towards the sort of conditions that prevailed on the waterfront in the 1920s and 30s.

Smith's remarks are a graphic example of the union's contempt for the intelligence of workers and utter indifference to the impact of these measures. The

agreement is in line with three decades of union collaboration with employers that has devastated jobs and hard-won working conditions on the waterfront.

The Hawke Labor government's Waterfront Industry Reform from 1987–91, which eliminated 4,500 jobs; the Patrick's dispute in 1998 that resulted in the destruction of 1,400 jobs; and every subsequent attack on waterside workers have been imposed by the waterfront union working in collaboration with the stevedore employers.

The MUA made clear from the outset of the Hutchison dispute that it had no opposition to the job cuts but wanted to be involved in all stages of the process. The union opposed strike action by other waterside workers or any other section of the working class.

The "reinstated" locked-out workers were told to join "community assembly" protests run by union bureaucrats and their political allies outside the company's container terminals. These gatherings had nothing to do with defending jobs but were to maintain the MUA's stranglehold over workers while it dragged out its negotiations and collected the names of those willing to take a redundancy package.

The MUA's hostility was not directed against Hutchison but against the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which exposed the union's collaboration with management's cost cutting plans. Senior MUA officials and other union bureaucrats used physical and verbal abuse against SEP supporters to try and prevent Hutchison workers receiving SEP leaflets and *World Socialist Web Site* articles.

In a statement on August 29 the SEP warned: "If left in the hands of the Maritime Union of Australia, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. Not only will jobs be lost at Hutchison, but the defeat will be used to set a new benchmark for driving up productivity and profits at the expense of workers across the waterfront and workplaces throughout the country."

Hutchison is reportedly in merger negotiations with the Filipino corporation International Container Terminal Services, which has port facilities in Melbourne, and is also preparing for the introduction of automated machinery. Moreover, the Hutchison-MUA agreement will trigger demands from rival stevedoring companies for similar concessions setting the stage for a new round of attacks on jobs and conditions across

the industry, including by Hutchison.

Anyone who believes the union lies about a "victory" for Hutchison workers is deluding themselves. The issue now is to prepare for a real battle to defend jobs and conditions which will only take place in a rebellion against the union. The first step is the formation of a rank-and-file committee and a turn to other sections of workers on the waterfront and other industries facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle requires a fundamentally opposed political perspective to class collaboration of the unions. Capitalism has nothing to offer workers but a future of mass unemployment, poverty and war. The defence of jobs is therefore completely bound up with the abolition of the profit system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. We urge workers to contact the SEP, the only party that fights for this program.

The author also recommends:

Amid moves to sell-out Hutchison workers, Maritime Union of Australia threatens WSWS
[14 October 2015]

Australia: Hutchison Ports dispute at the crossroads
[29 August 2015]

Hutchison Ports' sackings in Australia and the global restructuring of the docks
[12 August 2015]

Sacked Hutchison workers barred entry after Australian union sells out strike
[15 August 2015]

What was the "victory" on the Australian waterfront?
[13 April 1999]

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>