

Australia's industrial tribunal allows “super-union” merger

By Terry Cook
19 March 2018

On March 6, the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal industrial tribunal, allowed three prominent trade unions to form a supposed “super-union.”

Despite demands by major employers to block the merger, FWC deputy president Val Gostencnik said no provision in the Registered Organisations Act prevented it from going ahead.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) will form the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU).

The amalgamated entity, to be officially launched on March 27, will claim to have 144,000 members, estimated assets of \$310 million and annual revenue of \$146 million. Officials from the three unions issued statements to the media proclaiming that the new formation will be a massive boon for workers.

TCFUA secretary Michele O’Neil declared that “big businesses and governments should start preparing to pay better wages and increase job security,” because “ordinary workers now have a powerful new force for change on their side.”

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin, who will be appointed the CFMMEU’s international president, said: “Wherever there is a need to defend the interests of Australian workers, we will be there with them in their workplaces and communities.”

Such claims fly in the face of reality and the decades-long experiences of workers. They have suffered nothing but betrayals and sell-outs by the unions, which have imposed an ever-deepening assault on jobs, wages and working conditions.

Across every sector, including the mining, stevedoring and textile industries covered by these three organisations, the unions have worked tirelessly

to isolate disputes and undermine all attempts by workers to oppose the corporate onslaught. They have collaborated with the FWC and the employers to suppress any industrial or political movement of workers and impose one regressive enterprise agreement (EA) after another.

Just months ago, the CFMEU rammed through a 25 percent pay cut at Griffin Coal’s mine in Collie, Western Australia, along with the abolition of a number of conditions, resulting in a 35 percent reduction in earnings for some workers. The union similarly imposed real wage cuts at Australian Paper’s plant in the Latrobe Valley.

Likewise, the MUA has enforced years of job destruction, including over 60 retrenchments at Hutchison’s port operations in Sydney after betraying a week-long strike in 2015.

The unions are attempting to counter plunging membership levels resulting from an exodus of disgusted workers. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, just 10 percent of private sector workers are union members and 38 percent in the public sector, both record lows. According to Roy Morgan surveys, just 6.9 percent of workers under the age of 25 belong to a union.

The tub-thumping about a “super-union” forms part of a campaign launched this year by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), trying to present the unions as opponents of soaring social inequality and to direct mounting discontent behind the election of another big business federal Labor government.

CFMEU secretary Michael O’Connor proclaimed this month: “We are absolutely committed to a change of government, to changing the rules to restore balance and fairness into our communities, and to growing our movement.”

The ACTU claims that the Fair Work Australia legislation, which bans industrial action outside limited “bargaining” periods, is “broken” and that a Labor government would provide a fairer industrial relations regime.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Labor introduced the Fair Work laws, with the full support of the unions. The legislation was always designed to illegalise virtually all industrial and political action, create the conditions for the victimisation of workers and ensure a continuous offensive against wages and conditions.

The unions are not seeking to abolish the Fair Work laws. They are working to retain them, with some cosmetic changes. They also want Labor to more fully enshrine the unions in the industrial relations set-up. Above all, the unions are anxious to guarantee their positions at the negotiating tables, where they bargain away the jobs and conditions of workers, while ensuring the privileged position of the union officialdom.

The federal Liberal-National Coalition government opposed the merger. It would prefer to sideline the unions in favour of more direct means of imposing the corporate elite’s demands. The government introduced amendments to the Registered Organisations Act to prevent union mergers via a “public interest” test, but the amendments faced failure in the Senate.

The government’s position reflects the sentiments of some employers that view the unions as squeezed lemons that will be unable to contain an anticipated upsurge of the working class.

Australian Mines and Metals Association workplace relations director Amanda Mansini said: “It beggars belief that the intention of our workplace laws is to allow two unions with a history of law-breaking and many outstanding proceedings to merge, fuelling their capacity for greater lawlessness.”

In reality, the “law-breaking” has largely involved puerile stunts and empty posturing by union officials. It has enabled the courts to impose hefty fines, paid for by workers’ union dues, and created the pretext for the government to implement further repressive industrial laws to be used against workers.

The unions have moved rapidly to allay corporate concerns. Glenn Williams, MUA secretary for the Newcastle area, issued a statement that the new union

“was subject to the same industrial relations laws.” He ruled out joint industrial action, declaring that waterside workers “can’t just jack up in support of miners up the valley,” adding, “this thing about holding the whole coal chain to ransom is just ridiculous.”

Williams’ comments, and the entire record of the unions, confirm that the amalgamated entity will work with the major corporations against workers, while policing the draconian Fair Work legislation. Over the past three decades, unions everywhere have taken their nationalist and pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion, emerging as the chief proponents of ensuring the “international competitiveness” of their “own” industries, through the continual reduction of wages and conditions.

The unions cannot be reformed or revitalised. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to unite the working class in a common industrial and political fight against the union-enforced corporate offensive. Above all, a new political perspective is needed, aimed at the establishment of a workers’ government, which would implement socialist policies, including placing the major mining and port corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

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