

# Australia: DP World stevedoring strike against attacks on conditions

By Oscar Grenfell  
10 July 2019

Up to 1,800 stevedoring workers across Australia are taking industrial action against attempts by DP World Australia (DPWA) to impose further cuts to pay and conditions in a new workplace enterprise agreement.

Around 300 of the company's Brisbane employees struck on Monday and Tuesday. Some 600 wharfies began a three-day stoppage at the company's port in Melbourne. Another 600 Sydney workers will walk off the job for 48 hours starting tomorrow, along with hundreds more in Fremantle, Western Australia.

The stoppages are proceeding after a company application for them to be banned was rejected last week by the Fair Work Commission. Workers have also instituted a number of work bans, including to upgrades and overtime, which are also being challenged by DPWA at the pro-business industrial tribunal.

The company is claiming that the stoppages and other actions will result in "significant disruption," including forcing vessels to remain idle while port operations are shut down.

The strikes indicate a growing militancy in the working class and a determination by waterside employees to fight back against decades of job cuts and the continual erosion of conditions, enforced by the companies, successive Labor and Liberal-National governments and the corporatised unions.

DPWA, however, has signalled that it is determined to press ahead with a major overhaul of work practices, to slash labour costs and boost shareholder profits.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which was compelled to call this week's stoppages amid growing anger from workers, has made clear that it is seeking to push through a sell-out enterprise agreement.

Since February, when the previous deal expired, DPWA management has repeatedly demanded that the

MUA abandon its entire log of claims. The company has rejected calls for a limit on the use of casual labour at its ports. It has offered a pay increase of just 2.6 percent per annum, below the rapidly rising cost of living.

The company is seeking to roll over all of the provisions contained in a regressive MUA-brokered agreement in 2014, allowing it to expand casual and contract employment and press ahead with other cuts to conditions. It is also demanding the abolition of a union-operated income protection arrangement, established in the 2014 deal.

In comments to the *Australian Financial Review* (AFR) last May, DPWA's chief executive Glen Hilton demanded that workers recognise the "new commercial reality" and accept greater "flexibility." He warned that the company may turn to greater automation if its demands are not accepted, in a clear threat to impose mass sackings.

Hilton indicated that the company's offensive is aimed at further undermining permanent, full-time employment. According to the AFR, Hilton "said the company was in a situation where wharfies on fixed rosters were paid to come to the docks for no work, while part-time and casual workers were seeing their hours reduced."

The logical conclusion of his argument, is that the proportion of full-time workers must be reduced.

DPWA is seeking to emulate its competitors, which, with the crucial assistance of the unions, have automated large parts of their operations over the past two decades, and drastically reduced the size of their workforce. DPWA has the largest workforce of any of the stevedoring companies.

Some of its rivals, such as the Victoria International Container Terminal, are highly automated, conducting

their operations with a skeleton workforce. Others, such as Hutchison Ports, have a workforce of just several hundred across the country.

DPWA has also pointed to its declining market share, which fell from 45 percent of container movements in 2017-18 to 39 percent last financial year. Shipping has also been heavily impacted by economic turbulence since the global financial crisis of 2008-09, and there are fears of falls in container movements as a result of the growing turn by governments to trade war measures.

DPWA's parent company has responded with a series of acquisitions, aimed at expanding its operations in logistics and warehousing while slashing its port costs. The company's revenue increased in 2018 to \$5.6 billion, up from \$4.7 billion the year before.

While it has demagogically denounced DPWA, the MUA has sought to isolate workers at the company's ports and limit industrial action to isolated stoppages and work bans. The union's primary aim is to prevent a broader movement of dockworkers against the major companies, and to ensure its own privileged position at the bargaining table, which may be jeopardised by the removal of the income protection scheme.

In a clear sign that it is seeking to reach a sell-out agreement with the company, the MUA agreed to enforce a ban on industrial action for three months, ending in July. Union officials declared that this was intended as a signal that they were willing to bargain in "good faith."

MUA assistant national secretary Warren Smith told the *Age* this week that the union was "fully committed to reaching an agreement as quickly as possible." Smith absurdly added that the MUA would "not sell our conditions, compromise our core claims, or undermine industry standards to do it."

In reality, the union has enforced a decades-long assault on wages and working conditions.

The Waterside Workers Federation (WWF), the MUA's predecessor, imposed the Hawke Labor government's 1987-91 "Waterfront Industry Reform," which resulted in the destruction of 4,500 jobs.

The MUA, formed through the amalgamation of the Seamens Union of Australia and the WWF, contained the 1998 struggle by dock workers against attacks by stevedoring company Patrick. After ending strike action, the union forced through a sell-out agreement

that led to the destruction of 1,400 port jobs and a major expansion in the use of casual labour. This set the precedent for further union-enforced attacks.

In 2015, for instance, the MUA ended a week-long strike by workers at Hutchison Ports after the company notified 97 workers by text message that they no longer had a job. The union later signed-off on an enterprise agreement that provided for the elimination of over 60 full-time positions, a longer working week, and lower rates of real pay.

The record demonstrates that port workers cannot defend jobs and conditions without a complete break with the trade unions.

New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are required to coordinate an industrial and political fight by all port and shipping workers and to break the isolation imposed by the unions.

Above all, a new, socialist perspective is required, aimed at establishing a workers' government that would place the ports and shipping, along with the major banks and corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>