

Australian waterfront union shuts down industrial action at Patrick Terminals

By Patrick Davies
2 October 2020

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) yesterday called off limited industrial action by its nearly 1,000 members at Patrick Terminals in Sydney, Melbourne Brisbane and Fremantle.

MUA members began taking action early in September for a new enterprise agreement (EA) with work bans on extra hours and short sporadic stoppages that continued to allow ships to load and unload. The union had initially been demanding 6 percent annual pay rises for the next four years, but then reduced its claim to 2.5 percent.

When Patrick applied this week to Australia's industrial tribunal, the Fair Work Commission (FWC), for a ban on all industrial action, the union responded with a so-called "peace-deal." This included a rollover of the existing agreement for two years, with a 2.5 percent wage increase per year and a commitment that there would be no industrial action for 12 months.

Patrick rejected this yesterday and demanded that if the existing working conditions were to be retained, annual wage increases would be just 1.5 percent—i.e., a cut in real wages when adjusted for inflation. The hearing will resume on October 26 when Patrick will ask the FWC to permanently terminate the industrial action on the grounds that it is negatively impacting on the economy.

While the MUA rejected Patrick's demands yesterday, declaring that the company's offer would lead to "massive casualisation of the workforce" and the "stripping away of job security," its shutdown of industrial action demonstrates yet again the union's role again as an industrial police force.

From the outset, the union has been determined to isolate and contain the dispute whilst assuring waterfront employers that it is prepared to negotiate and impose their demands. As MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin told the *Australian* newspaper this week "We want a resolution to the thing."

Patrick's actions followed a similar move by DP World

Australia (DPWA), Australia's largest container terminal operator. It applied to the FWC on September 15 for the termination of industrial action at its port sites on the grounds of the "significant harm to the economy" that would result. There had been rolling work stoppages at DPWA's Port Botany facility and a planned 24-hour strike in Brisbane.

The MUA immediately responded by suspending action at DPWA until November—as a sign of "good faith"—and recommencing closed-door negotiations. The union claimed this to be a "breakthrough," and "a path for other stevedoring companies to resolve outstanding issues, rather than beat up public anxiety."

Over the past weeks, Patrick, DPWA management and the Shipping Australia industrial lobby group, along with the corporate media, have whipped up a hysterical campaign falsely claiming that the limited action at Patrick was holding up 40 container ships, and causing a backlog of 90,000 containers, including medical supplies.

Christian Porter, Australia's industrial relations minister, denounced the action by DPWA workers as a "threat to our economic recovery" and on Saturday Prime Minister Scott Morrison accused the MUA of "holding the country to ransom."

The MUA responded to the employer, government and media allegations by pointing to the limited and token character of the industrial action. National secretary Crumlin insisted that the only action at Patrick's Port Botany terminal was "a single four-hour stoppage about four weeks ago, along with bans on working excessive hours.... There is absolutely no way the limited, legal forms of industrial action undertaken by wharfies are capable of causing the massive delays claimed by the company."

Like their counterparts around the world, the stevedoring companies and other major corporations in Australia, with the active assistance of the unions, are

using the COVID-19 pandemic to completely restructure their operations and unleash a major assault on the working class.

On the Australian waterfront this means the removal of rostering restrictions, cuts to full-time jobs, even greater workforce casualisation and higher productivity demands. Anyone resisting these attacks is hit with a barrage of anti-worker hysteria.

On Tuesday, Morrison repeated Patrick's allegations of lines of ships outside Port Botany. In reality, the 40 ships supposedly waiting to berth in Sydney included vessels thousands of kilometres away, in places such as Papua New Guinea, Christmas Island and New Caledonia.

Asked by reporters if he would follow the Chifley Labor government's use of troops in 1949 to smash the national coal strike, Prime Minister Morrison replied, "I'm not going to pre-empt any of those sorts of things."

Morrison's refusal to rule out the use of the military is a clear threat to the working class. It shows that the ruling elite is prepared to deploy troops against the emerging struggles of the workers, if the union bureaucracy is unable to keep a lid on them.

The MUA has not issued any statement about Morrison's remarks or their implications.

In line with Australian Council of Trade Unions ongoing secret talks with employers, the MUA's central concern is ensuring its role as a corporatist labour-broker and maintaining the draconian "Fair Work" legal framework established in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government with the support of all the unions.

The posturing of MUA officials about defending jobs and conditions on the waterfront is as bogus as government and employer claims of lines of ships being held up by industrial action.

The MUA has overseen decades of restructuring on the Australian waterfront, rubber-stamping and enforcing the destruction of thousands of full-time jobs, extensive casualisation of the workforce and increased exploitation, with every betrayal hailed as a "victory."

Under the Hawke and Keating Labor government's "waterfront reform program," the maritime unions collaborated with employers to impose sweeping restructuring across the country's ports from 1987 to 1991, driving up crane container movements from 14 to 23 per hour and halving full-time employment across the sector from 8,300 to 3,800.

The Patrick waterfront strike in 1998 was shut down by the union, which then ratified the elimination of another 650 waterfront jobs—almost half the stevedore's

workforce—increased crane rates to up to 26 an hour and allowed the greater use of casuals (see: "What was the 'victory' on the Australian waterfront?").

This agreement established the framework for more than two decades of corporate attacks on the waterfront, including the MUA's deal with Hutchison Ports in 2015, which facilitated the sacking of 97 workers in Sydney and Brisbane. Today, over 50 percent of the Australian waterfront workforce is casualised.

The record demonstrates that there will be no defence of jobs or conditions by the MUA, which has decimated the workforce on the ports and imposed every employer demand, while suppressing opposition, including through the use of threats and intimidation.

What is required is a complete break with the union, and the development of independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate a genuine industrial and political struggle of all waterfront workers, and broader sections of the working class, against the company-union attacks.

The alternative to the corporatism and nationalism of the unions is a socialist perspective, based on the fight for the international unity of all workers. Port employees and seafarers, who are involved in an inherently global industry and are exploited by the same transnational corporations, wherever they are in the world, must increasingly link their struggles internationally.

The ports must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. This means the fight for a workers' government.

We urge workers at Patrick's terminals and other stevedoring companies seeking a way forward to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and discuss this perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>