Victory for Industrial Unionism at Cockatoo Island

Make the Unions Weapons of Struggle!

Enough of Hawke! Bust the Cold War Consensus!

On the back page of this supplement we carry an interview with Neil Flrottinell, a union militant and supporter of the Spartacist League. Flrottinell was sacked from his job as an ironworker-rigger at Sydney's Cockatoo Island dockyards on 15 March after he refused to work with apprentices... Hawke's union-busting threats of a total lockout, with a hundred workers and a drive launched to spread the union principles on the island, was forced to take action for the company to break a strike by the dockyard electricians. The interview details the successful fight that forced his reinstatement and defeated the company's attempts to roll back even this limited form of trade union solidarity.

This struggle, which started from one militant taking a stand against the growing erosion of basic trade union principles on the island, was taken up by the electricians and other workers and a drive launched to spread the strike to the rest of the island. On 26 March, with a hundred Cockatoo workers spilling out of the courtroom and faced with the threat of a total walkout, an Arbitration Court hearing recommended Flrottinell's reinstatement. The dispute had already gone to the Labour Council. The federal government had its back against the wall. And it brought sharply into focus the central questions facing workers at.

Cockatoo, which in microcosm are those confronting the labour movement as a whole.

The class struggle is sharpening in this country. The Bjelke-Petersen government has declared open war on the Queensland power workers and union rights generally. But Petersen has only taken one step further: Wran's union-busting threats of mass sackings hurtled at the NSW train drivers earlier this year. Almost to a man the official leadership of every major union remains committed to policing the workers for Hawke's "Accord" on behalf of big business. Labor's Cold War "consensus" more and more means union busting; slashing of public services and growing racist and social reaction - openly fuelled by Hawke's willing subservience to that union-buster and anti-communist fanatic Reagan with his global plans for nuclear war against the Soviet Union. But amongst the ranks of labour there is growing restlessness and hatred of these Labor governments. Instinctively the working class wants to fight but at every point it is blocked, lied to, and disorganised by the Labor politicians and their trade union lackeys. It's high time for some good fashioned class struggle to bust wide open Hawke's Cold War Accord.

The fight by Flrottinell and other militants clearly touched a felt need amongst the workers to fight together for common class interests. Traditional Laborite craft unionism such as at Cockatoo divides the workers fifteen different ways and sets up the situation where the bosses continually provoke sectional strikes which never really change thing. This is what feeds cynicism and anti-union rot.

If the unions are to be fighting organisations of struggle they need to organise on a plant and industry level, on the basis of industrial and social power, not along craft and trade lines.

It is a disgrace that the bosses are able to force apprentices ("legally" denied the right to strike) into breaking their own tradesmen's strikes. These young workers are virtual slave labour in their early working life under the present apprenticeship set-up, a feudalistic hangover from the British labour aristocracy and the guild system. As the Cockatoo events show the bosses take full advantage of the union tops' despicable refusal to organise their own youth. It is in everyone's interests except the employers that the apprentices get full union rights and adult rates of pay. Then perhaps some of us over 21 could also have the opportunity to get some decent job skills.

Nor are youth the only victims of this craftist arrogance. Thousands of unskilled, mainly migrant women, are left unorganised in sweatshop conditions, including in the metal industry, the province of the "left-wing" AMFSU. The women of the British miners' community demonstrated what outstanding class fighters women can be. Women, youth, migrants are the first victims of capitalist austerity. These oppressed.

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The social gains of the first and most powerful workers state which remains relatively secure is directly linked to defence of the workers unions and social progress.

Grouper unions are the most powerful and influential unions in the capitalist system. The labour bureaucracy spreads protection, nationalist poison, not least in the service industries. The treacherous poison of the capitalist regime not only protects Australian capitalists while saving not a jot of the job, it fuels racist divisions. The connection between workers in Australia and Pakistan, Japan, Italy, the United States, New Zealand, and the British empire, the different races and nationalities of the Australian working class, the worsening of the working class in general.

So the ASPs The FIA tops seem to have a pretty consistent policy of working against all the unions - as the membership and those of the workers generally.

Flower, Well, as you know the FIA tops spend most of their time and our dues money fronting for the government and the police and publicly standing up for Hawke's and Regean's favourite union, Polish Solidarnosc. In this fight, while they initially said they backed me, they attempted to bury the fight in Arbitration. In fact during the Arbitration Court hearing the organiser from the FIA denounced me before this bosses court for committing what he called a morally indefensible act in going against the majority of my union. In the quarterly branch meeting of the union last evening I put forward a motion to thank the electricians whose strike had won and pointed out the need for all the unions on Cockatoo Island to take up the fight to organise the electrical workers and the strikers suppressed using the Harvard School of Business rules that these types are trained in. Throwing in the FIA tops reaffirmed their support for ANZUS and the Cold War which conditions their opposition to all workers struggles. They even squashed an attempt by the men to discuss our gains and one of our strikes, last year. Myself and others called for them to be blacklisted and I was threatened by management for distributing copies of Jack London's famous condemnation of scavenging, a statement printed by the strikers of the South Wales Area of the NUM.

Of course all this goes back to the anti-communist witchhunting in the ironworkers in the 1950s when the government used the Postal Act to suppress the postal union. They got busy helping Menzies and the Liberals go after the workers.
A special meeting of the women garment workers of Magnum Garments Limited was organised last month in Brisbane on the initiative of the Spartanist League/Australia/Lanka. The funds raised at the meeting were to help workers who have suffered at the hands of the capitalists in Sri Lanka.

The funds collected in Australia in support of their strike last year was a very important precedent. The funds collected by the international Spartacist tendency thinks your struggles are very important.

Yes, we believe in international working class solidarity. It was British imperialism that was the great master of “divide and rule”, of turning one community against another in its empire. Now the Sri Lankan and other capitalistic ruling classes use the same tactics. But communality and racism divide the working class against each other and diverts trade union bureaucrats and the top leaders of the trade unions.

and the company that they will not have their ships, their submarines, or their atom bombs if they come up to their jobs. And such an action would be a battle cry to thousands of workers throughout the world who are all Australia’s been eating shit for years from both the Hawke and the Whitlam governments, from the Thatcher governments, to the government and public transport workers and many, many more.

About 100 mainly women workers at Magnum Garments in Sri Lanka met last month in a special meeting with the Auckland Spartacists to support the workers. The Auckland Spartacists are supporting the workers because the Labour Party have tried to sabotage the strike and have refused to bring out the other powerful forces of the workers on strike with the miners to defend jobs and get rid of Mrs Thatcher.

Our American comrades have collected hundreds of dollars for the miners. The money the miners receive goes into a special bank account to run the strike and support the miners in their families. It does not go to the union’s general funds. There have been calls for trade unionists to support it. We do not say that because a strike is not led by our party we will ignore it. Today our American, German and French comrades have been working very hard to support the British miners’ strike. The miners have been on strike for ten months. Now it is one of the coldest winters for thirty years. Please, if you want to construct a revolution you have to use police violence, scabs, the law courts and starvation to try and beat the miners with a scab at the union bureau.

We must sweep capitalism from the island and put it to the government to build a society that is fit for the workers and oppressed everywhere in the world. We do not say that because a strike is not in our country we will not support it. We do not say that because a strike is not led by our party we will ignore it. Today our

funds
month to 
ments Limited was 
reprinted 
of 
international Spartacist tendency is reprinted below.

It is a very great honour for me to speak to you today. I would like to explain why this is so, and why the international Spartacist tendency thinks your struggles are very important.

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Sacked FIA Militant Reinstated

Cockatoo Is. Workers Beat Company Attack!

Interview

ASPs Congratulations on your re- reinstatement, Neil. Did you feel it was a fight for basic union solidarity? I said that it posed the question of organising the apprentices to undercut the way the company has continually pitted one union against another and broken their strikes, that the need to set up picket lines to defend the strike was posed, as was the need to forge one industrial union on the island. One of the electricians put a motion at the next meeting that took up these questions and called for extending strike action, particularly for the FIA to reverse their stand and come out with the electricians. Some electricians started talking about setting up picket lines. But the motion was deferred to the next meeting so I decided with some electricians and ironworkers to tell the other workers this by distributing a statement to the island.

ASPs And what was the response? 

Flerroimell Well, in a small way the experience of this struggle shows that the working class's real strength lies in its independent mobilisation in strike action against the bosses. The strategy I pursued in conjunction with some militant electricians was to win this strike by broadening it, by fighting this fight on the basis of the objective interests of all the workers there. By contrast most of the delegates, including shop committee convener Bill Haggerty, who has been a longtime supporter of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), sat on their hands and waited for the Arbitration hearing. The Communist Party supports a group called the Rank and File Ironworkers, one of whose members, Max Callaghan, is a delegate for the shipyard section of the FIA. The CPA were architects of Hawke's Accord, so it's probably not surprising that Callaghan even refused to sign the statement we'd issued. Then there's the SLL's Workers News which is sold on the island. They wrote an initial report on the dispute but nothing at all about its victory. Instead they printed a sinister slander piece about the Spartacist League in the US claiming they supported white racist vigilantism and were evolving "toward fascism". Just slanderous garbage. Certainly the British miners have no time for this group after the way they set up Arthur Scargill for a Cold War witchhunt at the 1983 Trades Union Congress. He had just rightly denounced the Polish Continuation on page two


41 unionists put their names to this statement: 9 ETU members, 8 FIAarra members, 8 P&D members (including a delegate), 1 painter's union member, 4 federal & state officials of the FSPDU & the assistant secretary of Garden Island's Combined Unions Shop Committee.