

# Australia: Build rank-and-file committees on building sites! End the Labor government's CFMEU administration, defend wages and conditions!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)  
16 September 2024

The appointment of an administrator to run the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) is a blatant attack on the rights of building workers. With extraordinary speed, the Labor government has carried out one of the most sweeping attacks on the working class in decades, placing an entire organisation and its 80,000 members under the rule of a quasi-dictator answerable to the state.

The pretext that this is about cleansing the union of rogue elements is a fraud. The corruption allegations, completely untested and unsubstantiated, are merely a front. The real aim is to pave the way for major construction companies to gut wages and conditions across the building industry.

The construction union has been targeted because doubts have emerged in the ruling class over its capacity to adequately suppress the demands of a historically militant section of the workforce. While still far short of the rising cost of living, the 5–6 percent annual pay rises in recent CFMEU deals are considered unacceptably high amid an economic downturn.

This is an attack directed against the wages, conditions and democratic rights of the entire working class. If it is allowed to succeed, the administration of the CFMEU will serve as a blueprint for future attacks against any and all sections of workers.

The SEP stands squarely behind the tens of thousands of workers who have turned out to rallies, showing their determination to fight this anti-democratic travesty. State control of the CFMEU's construction division cannot be allowed to stand!

But the big-business Labor government's offensive will not be defeated through sporadic "community protests" organised by the ousted CFMEU leaders and their cronies in the other building union bureaucracies. Their sole perspective and aim is to restore the highly paid positions and privileges of the sacked construction union officials.

The fight against the administrator must be directed at winning real improvements to building workers' wages, conditions and job security, not reinstalling the same bureaucrats who have overseen their erosion over the past three decades.

This means construction workers need to take matters into their own hands. A network of rank-and-file committees must be built at

all major worksites and throughout the industry as the means through which workers can democratically organise to fight for their own needs and rights.

In the first instance, these committees must prepare a bold campaign of strikes and other industrial action demanding the removal of the administrator and the repeal of the latest draconian legislation. Any attempt by employers to tear up, modify or circumvent existing agreements should be answered with indefinite stoppages.

This struggle must be broadened beyond the building industry. A powerful appeal can be made to workers everywhere: The fight against Labor's attack on the CFMEU is a fight for the wages, conditions and democratic rights of the entire working class.

This should include a turn to the hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers around the country, including health workers and educators, who have all been slugged with real pay cuts as part of Labor's wage-slashing austerity agenda.

Above all, what is required is the mobilisation of broad layers of the working class in a political struggle against Labor and the entire framework of the Fair Work Act industrial legislation and the courts that enforce it.

In building such a counter-offensive, workers will have to break free from the straitjacket imposed by the union apparatus. The majority of Australia's unions, in lockstep with the Labor government, the Coalition and the building corporations, have fully supported the attack on the construction union and its 80,000 members.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has played a central role in the anti-democratic operation from the start, endorsing unproven media allegations against the CFMEU, expelling the union, and collaborating with Labor behind the scenes on the administration process.

The open complicity of the ACTU in the Labor government's move to effectively destroy a major industrial union and strip workers of basic workplace rights is revealing, but it is not an aberration.

The ACTU and its constituent unions—including, until two months ago, the CFMEU—have been at the forefront of every

major attack on the working class for the past four decades.

The ACTU-Labor Accords of the 1980s provided for the deregulation of the economy, the destruction of whole sections of industry and the decimation of hundreds of thousands of jobs. This was followed in the early 1990s with the introduction of enterprise bargaining, splitting workers into individual workplaces and establishing the framework for unions to ram through one sell-out agreement after another.

Building upon this, Labor's 2009 Fair Work Act imposed harsh anti-strike laws, upon which the union apparatus has relied ever since to suppress the struggles of workers. The majority of Australia's unions are now defending Labor's latest Fair Work amendments—to crush the CFMEU—just as all unions have supported every pro-business iteration of the legislation since its introduction.

This includes the CFMEU, as well as the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Plumbing and Pipe Trades Employees Union (PPTU) and Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which now claim to oppose the Labor government's attack.

Their rhetorical denunciations of the Labor government and talk of a break with the ACTU are designed to provide a militant veneer for their real objective: Defending the status quo ante and restoring the privileged positions of their ousted mates in the CFMEU bureaucracy.

This was starkly expressed at the August 27 rally in Melbourne, where a motion was moved demanding that sacked construction union officials be allowed to retain their positions on the boards of the industry superannuation funds they jointly control with high-ranking building industry executives.

This was a slap in the faces of the 40,000 workers before them, who had rallied to fight for their wages, conditions and democratic rights, not to defend the bureaucrats' cosy relationship with the financial elite.

The privileges enjoyed by union leaders are their reward for enforcing the dictates of governments and corporations for decades, against the demands of workers. They are now seeking to restore their role as a highly compensated industrial police force, keeping workers tied to Labor and the Fair Work framework.

Because their whole existence is predicated on their suppression of the class struggle, the bureaucrats remain hostile to the actual mobilisation of workers, even when they themselves are under attack.

That is why not a single strike was called against the administration process in the six weeks during which it was prepared. Only after the deed was done, and they had no other option, did the ousted CFMEU leadership call workers out, and then, only for a brief rally.

Instead, they have engaged in one backroom manoeuvre after another, wheeling and dealing behind the scenes with the Labor government and the pro-business Fair Work Commission. The bureaucrats had no objection to the union being placed under administration, as long as they were allowed to hold on to their jobs.

The symbol of this perspective, to which the ousted leaders aspire, is CFMEU National Secretary Zach Smith, who remains in this (\$380,000 per annum) position, now as an errand boy for the

state-appointed administrator.

By no coincidence, Smith also serves on the national executive of the Labor Party, which is trying to cripple the construction union. The CFMEU bureaucracy has been an integral part of Labor for decades, serving on the party's executive committees, funnelling vast amounts of members' dues into the party and campaigning aggressively for Labor in elections. Not only are they well aware of the Labor government's pro-business program, they are responsible for it.

For years, the union leaders have told workers that the Liberal-National Coalition was their enemy and that the only way to defend their jobs, pay and conditions was by electing Labor governments. This line, which was always a fraud, is now completely exposed.

The same Labor government that is attacking the CFMEU is seeking to impose the full burden of the deepening crisis of global capitalism upon all workers, whether in the building industry, the public sector or more broadly. Public spending on hospitals, schools and other vital infrastructure is being slashed, while military expenditure is ramped up in preparation for a US-led war with China.

Labor is conscious of mounting hostility to this pro-business, pro-war agenda, reflected in plummeting opinion polls and in the ongoing weekly protests against the government's complicity in Israel's US-backed genocide against Palestinians.

The Labor government's attack on workplace rights is in line with its broader efforts to criminalise and suppress protests, as was starkly displayed in last week's violent police attacks on anti-war protesters in Melbourne.

This underscores the need for a unified political struggle by the working class, not just against Labor, but the capitalist system and its subordination of every aspect of workers' lives to the profits of the financial and corporate elite.

Such a struggle is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus which is not just intimately tied to, but an integral part of, Labor and the political establishment.

To take forward such a fight, workers need new organisations of struggle. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers and politically and organisationally independent of any union, must be built in workplace across the country.

Above all, what is posed is the need to fight for a workers' government and for socialism. The big builders and property developers, as well as the banks and other major corporations, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. Only in this way can society's vast resources be utilised to provide the social needs of the entire population, including affordable housing and a permanent, full-time job with decent pay and conditions, not the further enrichment of the wealthy few.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**