

# Australian pseudo-left creates fake rank-and-file group to prevent struggle by construction workers against CFMEU administration

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The federal Labor government's appointment of a quasi-dictator to run the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) has provoked widespread opposition among building workers and more broadly.

Labor's anti-democratic move is not about dealing with unsubstantiated media allegations of corruption within the union. Construction workers' democratic rights have been eviscerated to facilitate a wholesale attack on their wages and conditions.

The aim is to drive down labour costs amid a slowdown in the construction sector and a slump in the real economy. A historically militant section of the working class is being targeted, as a precedent for a broader onslaught to make workers pay for the crisis of capitalism and a massive military build-up for war. The clear message is that any opposition will be met with state repression.

Mass rallies around the country in August and September demonstrated that tens of thousands of construction workers want to fight against the administration. They have been shocked by what is widely seen as a betrayal by the Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which has been complicit in the administration process from the start.

But defeating this attack requires more than determination. To defeat the unprecedented attack on their democratic rights and conditions, construction workers will have to take up a political and industrial struggle against not just the Labor government, but the union apparatus and the entire political establishment.

This is impossible behind the CFMEU "leadership-in-exile" and their cronies in the other building union bureaucracies. Their sole concern is reinstating sacked officials to their highly paid posts to resume their role as frontline suppressors of the class struggle.

Building workers have to take matters into their own hands.

The Socialist Equality Party is calling for the establishment of rank-and-file committees at all major worksites and throughout the industry as the means through which workers can organise to fight for their own needs and rights. These committees must be democratically led by workers themselves and independent from the CFMEU and all other unions, which are no longer workers' organisations in any sense, but serve as an industrial police force of governments and corporations.

The establishment of the "Rank & File: Hands off the CFMEU" group by the Socialist Alliance organisation is directed against this perspective. For decades, Socialist Alliance, along with other fake-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Solidarity have insisted on the unchallengeable hegemony of the union bureaucracy.

They have vehemently opposed the SEP's fight for rank-and-file committees to combat the four-decade long assault on workers' wages and conditions enforced by the bureaucracy. These organisations have

excused every betrayal, while insisting that the greatest sin would be for workers to take action independent of the union bureaucracy.

But now, with mass anger and opposition among construction workers and the ousted CFMEU leadership in a crisis, Socialist Alliance has established the "Rank & File: Hands off the CFMEU" group. It was founded in mid-July, when Labor first raised the possibility that the construction division of the CFMEU might be placed under administration or even de-registered.

The group is not a rank-and-file committee, but a front for the CFMEU bureaucracy, aimed at heading off genuine rank-and-file committees.

Socialist Alliance sprang into action amid growing dismay and anger of building workers at the inaction of the CFMEU apparatus in the wake of the threats by the government. In the six weeks that followed the orchestrated and manufactured media and government allegations of corruption, the union called not a single strike action for workers to fight this attack. Instead, they were engaged in various backroom manoeuvres with the government and the industrial courts, aimed not at preventing administration, but at positioning itself to play a key role in its implementation.

Concerned that this initial lack of response would see angry construction workers take action independently, the group was set up to trap these workers and ultimately herd them back into the union framework.

This subservience to the bureaucracy was sharply expressed in July, when the group abruptly called off a rally planned for August 5 outside the ACTU offices, after the CFMEU leadership and several of its allies expressed "concern" over the proposed action. The "concern" was that the rally had been organised "without talking to unions."

The so-called "rank and file" group has never repeated this dreadful crime of calling for action without the approval of the union officialdom.

Once the legislation was passed and many of the CFMEU bureaucrats found themselves out of a job, the first strike rallies were organised. The phoney "rank and file" group wholeheartedly endorsed these events, which were not aimed at defending the jobs, wages and conditions of building workers, but at restoring the privileges of the ousted bureaucrats.

Since then, the group's activities have largely consisted of promoting token "solidarity" motions passed by a handful of union and Labor Party branches—that is, appeals to sections of the very organisations spearheading the attack on building workers.

As the weeks have passed, the "rank-and-file" group has increasingly signalled that, like the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy, it is willing to make its peace with administration, while campaigning for its own positions and privileges to be reinstated. The group has thus promoted Zach Smith, national secretary of the CFMEU, who is one of the few high-ranking construction union officials kept on by the administrator as a trusted facilitator of Labor's attack. Smith is also a member of the Labor Party's

national executive.

At the group's October 9 meeting, longstanding Socialist Alliance member Sue Bull gave a gushing account of an "extremely good" CFMEU branch meeting held the previous week, at which Smith declared, "All union meetings, including branch and shop steward meetings would continue as normal."

This is essentially a vow to proceed as if the Labor government had not just sacked 300 elected officials and other union personnel and handed over control of 80,000 workers' capacity to fight for wages, conditions and safety to a lawyer who answers only to the state.

Underscoring its role as an appendage of the union, even while it is under the thumb of the administrator, the "rank and file" group moved two motions at the October 2 branch meeting.

The first was a plaintive call—directed at the very Labor government responsible for the attack on the CFMEU—for an end to administration, repeal of the Fair Work amendments, and the reinstatement of sacked officials and "removed persons."

The motion also called for the reinstatement of "our chosen reps on [the board of superannuation firm] CBUS." This demand, also made prominently at the August mass rally, reflects the primary concern of the ousted CFMEU leaders and their pseudo-left allies. While workers are told merely to "stick together" and wait while their rights, wages and conditions are attacked, restoring the position and privileges of the well-heeled bureaucrats is a matter of urgency.

The second motion called on organisers, delegates, shop stewards and health and safety representatives to "commit to continuing to fulfil [their] duties." If a delegate was sacked by their employer for doing so, "a levy [would] be collected from members to financially assist sacked delegates."

The pseudo-left are helping the current and former union bureaucrats to promote the fraud of peaceful coexistence with the administrator in an attempt to defuse workers' opposition to Labor over what they understand is a massive attack on their democratic rights and a threat to their wages and conditions.

That Bull, along with another longstanding Socialist Alliance member Tim Gooden, have been assigned a leading role in this phoney "rank-and-file" group is no accident. They are themselves members of the privileged and anti-working class union bureaucracy.

Bull served as a trainer of health and safety representatives for the CFMEU and Gooden as the former head of the Geelong Trades Hall Council. In that role, Gooden was a central figure in the "orderly closure" of the Victorian car industry, acting on behalf of the corporations and government.

These individuals personify the class character of Socialist Alliance and the other pseudo-left groups. They do not represent the working class or have any connection to socialism whatsoever. Instead, they are pro-capitalist parties of the upper-middle class, tied by a thousand threads to the union bureaucracy and Labor.

Their primary role is to provide political cover for every sell-out deal cooked up by the union leaderships. This includes the CFMEU bureaucracy, which has presided over the erosion of jobs, wages and conditions in the building industry for three decades.

This is part of the broader transformation of the unions. With the shift, primarily in the 1980s, to globally integrated production, unions everywhere have gone from extracting limited concessions from employers within a highly regulated national framework to serving as machines for overturning the hard-won conditions of workers, to keep businesses "internationally competitive."

To the extent that Socialist Alliance and the other pseudo-left organisations occasionally criticise the trade unions, it is to falsely portray their betrayals as the product of the mistakes or the bad intentions of individuals. This is, above all, directed against the analysis of the Socialist

Equality Party, that the union bureaucracy is a social layer that is fundamentally hostile to the interests of workers and that the only way forward for the working class is to build an opposition against it.

This is covered up by the pseudo-left in an effort to hoodwink workers into thinking that the fight for a political alternative to capitalism, and the subordination of their needs to the profit demands of big business, is neither necessary nor possible.

Central to this is the promotion of Labor as a "lesser evil." Under conditions of the Labor government undertaking the harshest action against workers and unions in decades, Socialist Alliance insists that a Labor defeat at the next election would make things worse.

In service of this fraud, the pseudo-left presents administration as a single issue, unconnected to broader issues facing the working class internationally. All that is required, they claim, is a lobbying campaign directed to the union apparatus and the Labor government itself to reverse the administration.

In reality, the administration is a warning of what capitalism and its representatives have in store for the entire working class. Amid an unprecedented breakdown of global capitalism, the financial elite is insisting that workers' conditions be returned to those that existed in the 1930s. At the same time, the US and all the imperialist powers are implementing a militarist agenda to offset their own crisis, posing the imminent threat of a world war.

The Labor government is intimately involved. It supports the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the threats of war against Iran and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Above all, Labor and the union bureaucracy are completing Australia's transformation into a frontline state for a US-led war against China. That agenda means suppressing all opposition from the working class.

This broader context shows that workers confront major political issues. To defeat the administration, construction workers and the working class as a whole will need to make a decisive political break with Labor and the union bureaucracy. This requires the building of new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, in workplaces around the country.

First, 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.

But this fight is much bigger than the building industry. Rank-and-file committees of construction workers must make a powerful appeal 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 poses the need for a unified struggle, involving the broadest layers of the working class. This is impossible within the framework of the trade union apparatus, whose modus operandi is to keep workers isolated to prevent them from exercising their power as a class.

All workers should draw sharp lessons from the fact that the ACTU, and the leaders of most unions in the country, have eagerly endorsed the Labor government's disenfranchisement of 80,000 CFMEU members. No worker can believe for a second that union bureaucrats who cheer on an attack on workers in one industry will fight to defend workers in another.

What is required is not just a fight against the CFMEU administration, but against a broader assault on jobs, wages and conditions, spearheaded by Labor governments throughout the country and enforced by the compliant trade unions.

Above all, a political alternative is required. Capitalism offers a future of endless cuts to wages and conditions, mass unemployment, war and authoritarianism. The alternative is a socialist perspective, aimed at ending the domination of the banks, the corporations and the property developers, and reorganising economic life to meet the needs of working people.

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The Socialist Equality Party is holding a meeting for workers to discuss the significance of the administration and how to fight it on Sunday, October 27 at 2 p.m. (AEDT).

**Sydney**

Belmore Senior Citizens Centre, 38 Redman Parade, Belmore, NSW  
Reserve your seat in Sydney [here](#).

**Melbourne**

Activity Room 2, Kathleen Syme Library, 251 Faraday St, Carlton, VIC  
Reserve your seat in Melbourne [here](#).

If you can't attend in person, the meeting will be livestreamed. Register for the Zoom livestream using [this link](#).



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**