

Workers and young people speak out against CFMEU administration at SEP (Australia) meeting

Our reporters
29 October 2024

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a successful public meeting on Sunday, advancing an independent perspective for workers to fight Labor’s imposition of an administrator over the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU). The event was held in-person in Sydney and Melbourne and streamed live on Zoom.

Speakers explained that the imposition of state control had nothing to do with unsubstantiated allegations of corruption, but was aimed at slashing workers’ pay and conditions. They drew the connection between this attack on workers’ rights and the global context of escalating imperialist militarism and authoritarianism amid capitalist crisis.

The speakers exposed the complicity of the CFMEU bureaucracy itself in the imposition of the administration and called on building workers to form independent rank-and-file committees to take forward their struggle.

A full report of the meeting, including all of the speeches, is available here. Afterwards, workers and young people spoke on the issues raised.

Arthur, a construction worker and CFMEU member in Melbourne, said, “Workers need to rise up and not just be part of a union. Just following the union leaders makes them sheep, and they just do whatever they’re told until they can’t afford to do what they’re told anymore. They need to take control of what’s happening and not just be fed a story. I think that’s what I took from the meeting.”

Arthur said there was growing dissatisfaction, as well as confusion, among CFMEU members. “Within rank-and-file members, there is a thought that the union has become a bit too big for its boots, that they think they’re better than us workers. They’re not telling us stuff. They do whatever they like. They swan around, they act tough, they talk a big game, then walk away. We do need a union, but I think a lot of them keep us in the dark, much like the SEP points out. We don’t get told information.”

Speaking on the broader situation, he added: “I think capitalism is failing the people, but that’s what capitalism

wants. It just keeps feeding the hungry machine and keeps the workers down. It’s now reached that point of war after war.”

Oliver joined the public meeting via Zoom. He works as an electrician in a regional city in Victoria.

On the government’s placing an administrator in control of the CFMEU, he said, “To me, it shows the true colours of the Labor Party. Some people say that the unions control the Labor Party, but it’s the other way around. Especially in the upper parts of the unions, especially the state and national secretaries, it’s just a revolving door for Labor Party officials and politicians. They are more interested in their own careers than in any kind of leftist ideology at all. Also, as a member of Cbus [a superannuation fund], it makes me sick that the bureaucracy thinks the retirement savings fund is some sort of employment security for officials. So typical of that layer.”

He continued: “The government is going for the strongest section of the trade unions on purpose, for strategy. I think the goal is that they are wrapping up neo-liberalism and now we are getting just straight-up austerity against the working class and this is part of it. They are literally just shutting down public services now, without any decent excuse. It’s going from the argument that privatisation is more efficient to just plain austerity, claiming that the government can’t afford to fund all those basic services, such as education. This runs completely counter to my values.”

On the SEP’s public meeting, Oliver responded: “This is the second public meeting I have been to, I went to the Julian Assange one you organised before. It was really great this time hearing from some of your older members who worked in the construction industry. It was good to hear their experiences—you can read the WSWs and read all about rank-and-file workers’ committees—but to hear the experiences of workers who have been involved in this work, it is helpful. One of the guys talked about corporatism, that really stood out for me. That’s how I feel about it—the union officials are

just there to get people behind the government, especially with the wars that are now taking place.

“I feel that, with the war in Iraq, Labor was in opposition, and even though they were all for it, it was very much identified as a right-wing, George Bush and John Howard kind of thing, but now Labor is really the George Bush and John Howard party.”

Gerry, a registered nurse, told the WSWS: “I see union executives being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars, while ordinary members work day and night to earn a pittance. I see EBAs [enterprise bargaining agreements] which are grossly unfair and exploitative, and I see union organisers working with employers to the detriment of ordinary workers. The current situation with the CFMEU is the thin edge of the wedge. Who are they going to come for after they are finished with the CFMEU? Whatever happened to ‘stand up, fight back,’ or ‘touch one, touch all’? Where are the red lines in this dispute, and how bad does it have to get before someone says enough is enough?”

“Working people have been let down by the union movement and the ALP again and again. We cannot let this dispute splinter the working class even more. I do agree that rank-and-file committees are an excellent idea, and one way in which we can work collectively to demand a liveable wage and bearable, safe working conditions.”

Ricky, a 17-year-old high school student, was attending his first SEP-IYSSE public meeting. He told the WSWS: “The measures that the Labor government is taking, replacing the leaders of the CFMEU with someone that’s going to enact their wishes—it’s quite dictatorial, and I agree that it is an attack on the working class. It’s an obstruction on freedom of speech, to ensure that there is control of the working class, to prevent any sort of uprising or revolution against what the Labor government is going to do. The government is working with America in the conflicts in the Middle East, in Ukraine, and over a possible conflict with China.”

Ricky spoke on the danger of world war: “We are just on the precipice of a global conflict that would pull all the major powers in. If Israel and Iran go to war, then America will be pulled into it, and China and Russia will be pulled into it. Because Israel has already launched missiles into Tehran, at this point it’s almost like someone’s lit a fuse and at some point that fuse is going to blow. It is going to bring all these countries into that global conflict that’ll devastate the international community.

“As for what we can do, I think we have to be proactive, maybe a bit more extreme. The government doesn’t seem keen on having a peaceful world, they seem keen on taking out their enemies, and working with America. They’re supporting a literal genocide in Palestine. The deal for the

AUKUS submarines shows that Australia’s government is not going to choose that path of peace. There has to be a full-on revolution of the working class against the government.”

In Sydney, **John**, a plumber, said: “I decided to attend today’s meeting because as soon as I heard the government was taking over the CFMEU, I knew it wasn’t about corruption. Corruption exists across all governments and extends into the police and the legal system, but people should understand that this is a government setup.

“I agree with what people said in the meeting about the Labor government and that it looks after big business. The takeover must have been part of a pre-organised plan and will definitely make things worse for the wages and conditions of building workers. The meeting helped me understand a lot more about how this all happened and its history, and showed me that we are not living in a democracy in Australia.”

Vaitheeswaran, a worker in Sydney, said, “In the media and from the government, they have said that the issue with the CFMEU is corruption. They have deliberately confused the issue and you cannot trust what they say.” He expressed agreement with the SEP’s analysis that the real aim is to attack pay and conditions.

“This is happening everywhere. Where I am from, Sri Lanka, there is a huge crisis facing poor people. Prices have gone up by enormous amounts, people cannot afford the basic necessities and this has been going on for years. There are differences in different countries, some different levels of hardship, but workers face the same issues around the world.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact