

Construction Workers First Target of Howard's I.R.

Attack

On 22nd of June 2005 construction workers will officially become second class citizens under the Australian laws. On this day construction workers will lose their right to silence.

Officers of Howard's industrial police force, the Building Industry Taskforce will be able to require any construction worker to answer questions. Refusal to answer could result in fines of up to \$3300 and imprisonment for up to six months.

Construction workers as a class will lose civil liberties which other Australians take for granted- rights available to a person accused of murder are to be denied to construction workers accused of participating in a stop work meeting.

Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the hatred and contempt which John Howard and his government have for working people in the construction industry. This is a law designed to turn construction workers into informers against their own workmates.

In the construction industry we have had more than our share of attacks from this government. Millions of dollars were thrown at the Cole Royal Commission, a shabby attempt to smear construction workers in the public's eyes. None of the allegations of standover, corruption or violence levelled by this kangaroo court have been upheld by any real court of law- in fact none of them have ever been prosecuted, so weak was the basis on which Cole made his so- called findings.

Cole's real mission was to recommend laws to crush unionism in the building industry, and he earned the million dollars plus fee from his political masters by doing exactly that.

How Did It Come To This?

In the ten years since Howard took power, we have seen constant attacks on the Australian workforce. The sight of workers driven from the wharves by goons and attack dogs as Howard and Reith slapped each others backs will be one of the images burnt into our memories. But the struggle of the wharfies for their jobs, their entitlements and their right to a union is just one of many- meatworkers locked out, coal miners sacked and

blacklisted; these are the hallmarks of the workplace under Howard.

All this because these workers rejected individual contracts and stood firm for their right to a union and for a collective agreement.

The Construction Industry

In our own industry we've made gains while some others went backwards- improvements in wages and conditions as well as shorter hours. There has been a sustained boom in the construction industry, with investors reaping massive profits and company bosses awarding themselves multi-million dollar wage packages.

Aussie Construction labour is as productive as any in the world, according to independent surveys. Skills are in short supply as governments and employers have failed to support the apprenticeship system or provide adequate training for workers. Perhaps this has led some construction workers seem to have come to the conclusion that we are "bullet proof" and that no

government can stop us from going forward in the same way we have for the last ten years.

Many workers who buy a union ticket and back the union 100% in fighting for wages and conditions felt that they had the luxury of voting for Howard. We all know people who thought they could back the union on the job and Howard in the ballot box. Polling shows that over 30% of union members voted for the coalition.

The union has been telling members year after year that Howard and his mates were out to cut their wages and conditions and it's clear that a lot of people stopped listening. Perhaps we are victims of our own success; perhaps it was the interest rate scare.

Total Control of the Parliament

Whatever the reasons, with the Senate in Howard's control, all construction workers are now going to find out just what this government is really about. I've already mentioned the new powers of the task force, Howard's industrial police force, which remove our right to silence.

But that's only one of a barrage of proposed anti worker laws.

Already, there's a bill in the parliament increasing fines against unions to \$110 000. If you're a worker, it's up to \$22 000 for an individual. These fines could be for any industrial action – even a stop work meeting.

If the stoppage is over safety, each worker will have to prove that they believed that their safety was at risk – a reverse onus of proof. This is a recipe for more deaths and injuries in our industry which already averages more than 50 deaths a year.

Secret ballots will be compulsory for industrial action with massive penalties for non compliance.

Pattern bargaining will be banned and all sorts of obstacles put in the way of unions getting agreements.

Deregistration of unions will be made easier for breaches of commission orders.

The task force will be reborn as the Australian Building and Construction Commission. Unions will be compelled to notify them of most everyday activities, such as going on site or

serving notices on employers. Employers will have to inform this body of union activities on pain of penalties.

The construction award will be gutted, with hard won conditions such as hours of work, overtime, training, union rights, superannuation and accident make up pay removed.

These laws are in addition to other laws to be introduced across all industries restricting union's right of entry, abolishing redundancy pay and unfair dismissal for employees of small business and attacking minimum wages for low paid workers.

So what is the union doing about all of this?

Firstly we're campaigning right around Australia to roll over agreements to protect members' wages and conditions. The Victorian Branches are to be congratulated their breakthrough in this area. Steady progress is being made in other states, but there is still a lot to do.

Secondly, we're educating our own members and the general public about the effects of these laws. This includes our usual methods of meetings leaflets and campaigning as well as an ACTU television campaign advertising campaign.

Workers need to be aware of their rights- for example despite what I've said about the right to silence, you do have the right to seek advice before you say anything. The union is producing a booklet about the Taskforce, so that members know their rights as well as other information in print and on our website www.cfmeu.asn.au/construction.

This education process needs to continue past the introduction of these laws and up to and beyond the next election.

The ALP and other non coalition parties must give clear commitments to reverse these laws, and they will be held to account.

Lastly we need to have our own house in order. The union has reached a position that will maximise unity and enable us to concentrate on the main game- defending the union and protecting the members in the hard years we are facing.

Why the CFMEU

It's no coincidence that the CFMEU is the union singled out for the main attack.

That's because we've been effective in looking after members and we've stood up to this government so many issues.

The federal government and their mates in the right wing media use every opportunity to slander and smear construction workers and their unions. This is part of the same process of demonising a group of workers that wharfies suffered in the run up to the waterfront dispute. It's engineered by spin doctors and government staffers and paid for by our taxes. Most media outlets are happy to swallow this propaganda- its sensationist, easy copy and neatly fits their owner's prejudices. There are only a few honourable exceptions to this particular rule.

We can't ignore the potential of these laws to bankrupt the union and to hurt our members. So we have to be smart measured and disciplined in our response. Nothing would suit Howard better than a knee jerk reaction which he could use to smash our organisation. For the sake of future generations of construction workers, we must not let this happen.

The rank and file and officials must cooperate in exercising this discipline.

But just as we won't let Howard put us out of business, we won't put ourselves out of business.

I mean by this that the union will continue to fight for its members on the job.

We will continue to stand up for social justice in our country and around the world.

we will support those singled out for attack by the federal Government or the employers in the courts.

We won't be silenced, we won't be beaten, and together, however long it takes, however hard it gets we will defeat these laws.

With hard work, discipline and militant struggle we will see the back of this government and when they're long gone, the CFMEU will still be standing strong.

Dave Noonan

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2nd May 2005.