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# Longford Workers Fight Back!

Last week I was privileged to attend a community protest in Longford by maintenance workers employed by ESSO, whose parent company, Exxon Mobil, is the 6th biggest company in the world: a company which last year paid no tax on their \$8.5 billion profit made in Australia from Australian workers and Australian resources. This company has cut the wages of more than 200 local maintenance workers by up to 30%, reduced annual leave, cut loadings and introduced unacceptable rosters with the potential to destroy family life.

The protest has entered its 200th day, with decent, hardworking men at this protest losing wages, sacrificing themselves and their families for a fundamental principle – the right to a decent living, for security and for a just work future for their children and grandchildren and for all working people.

The workers showed us where the company is flying in scab labour from around Australia in order to lower wages and conditions. This is despite their massive profits and their failure to pay taxes that should be providing housing, healthcare and hospitals for the Australian people.

What this experience highlighted is the now overwhelming and urgent need for a national campaign to fight back against the loss of conditions, of savage industrial laws, of outlawing the right to strike, to assemble and to protect workers' interests against the increased and greedy demands of employers. This is not just a problem for Longford workers, but for all employees in every industry in Australia whose work, income and conditions, all won by previous generations of unionists, are being undermined by savage and unjust industrial laws designed to ensure that the mega profits of capital are safeguarded. The Longford workers are shining a light on this need.

It was clear that this is not just an issue for the unions involved, or for the Longford workers taking a courageous stand in defence of workers' rights. This is an issue for the whole community, for the trade union movement, the ACTU, the Labor Party, churches, academics and workers in every industry. We all need

to be united against this blatant destruction of the rights of workers and their hard won conditions. It cannot and must not be tolerated.

We need an urgent campaign to recognise and protect the right to strike, the right of workers to withdraw their labour, the right to assemble and the right for workers to be strongly represented by their elected union officials.

In the marketplace or on the stock exchange, in the world's banks, where the rich and powerful play their manipulative money games, it is normal and accepted practice that they can withdraw their funds, manipulate the markets and destroy competitors. The question must therefore be raised: Where does the labour of workers fit in? What are their rights? Can they legally withdraw their labour? And if not, why not?

It cannot be disputed that labour is the source of all wealth. If workers withdrew their labour, there would be no building construction, no newspapers printed, no customer service, no power generated, no public transport, no hospitals, no ambulances, no fire fighters and the country would come to a halt. This is the importance of labour. It brings to mind the words of Dame Mary Gilmore, whose poem *The Union Man* says it all.

*One step to speak, one step to take,  
A thousand men as one,  
As like a wall least one should fall,  
They stand till all is one.  
A thousand men, no two alike,  
and yet they stand as one.  
While they so stand, no alien hand,  
can bring them down undone.*

Without labour, the system would collapse. So what do workers have to sell? The only commodity workers have control over is their labour. In order to live, workers sell their labour to the employer for the highest return and they need to battle with capital to get the best return they can. This also gives them the right to withdraw the labour that belongs solely to them.

After Federation, workers learned that the most efficient way to obtain justice was to work together. Unions were

formed, collectively workers' strength was multiplied and their negotiations gained power. The trade union movement won many victories and improved the lives of workers and their families, not just in better wages and conditions, but in their broader lives, fighting for decent housing, healthcare and education.

In 1996, however, the conservative Howard government introduced the Workplace Relations Act that reduced workers' entitlements under awards and severely limited the unions' capacity to organise and pursue members' interests.

With the 1998 MUA dispute, workers and community fought back. The union movement stood together, and with community support, won a great victory against the employer and government attacks on the right to organise, the right to strike (withdraw labour), the right to picket and the right to be a union member.

In 1999 a second wave of anti-union legislation from the Howard government was defeated by a combination of union and community activity. 'Unions@work', adopted by the ACTU as a blueprint for renewal and rebuilding of the union movement, resulted in the following:

- The right of workers to form a union which elects its own independent representatives
- Awards to ensure that employers observe minimum wages and working conditions
- Equal pay
- Long service leave

- Pay loading for evenings, nights and weekends
- Paid public holidays
- Periodic wage increases
- Maternity/adoption/parental leave
- Annual leave and leave loading
- Protective clothing and equipment provided by the employer
- Occupational health and safety laws
- Compensation for injury
- Occupational superannuation
- The right to be given notice and to be consulted about changes at work (e.g. new technology, planned retrenchments, new working arrangements)
- Personal carers' leave.

Much of the above are either under attack or have been lost, and so the struggle between labour and capital in the capitalist system continues, but in this ugly period of neoliberalism there has been too much capitulation by the labour movement to the detriment of working people and their unions.

Militant talk will not resolve the problems facing Australian workers. Unions, trades, labour councils and the ACTU must walk the walk, and develop a fight back campaign before it is too late.

Congratulations to the Longford workers and their families for their 200th day of protest on behalf of the whole Australian workforce, and indeed, all Australians who value justice, fairness and equality. 🙏

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