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National port strikes loom over MUA row with Patrick

THE AUSTRALIAN JANUARY 15, 2016 12:00AM, Elizabeth Colman

Harper's department, Privy Council Office, twice orders extra public-opinion research on public dime Patrick Stevedores has blasted "extreme forces" within the Maritime Union of Australia for escalating a dispute over wharfies' pay and conditions, set to culminate in the first national strikes to befall the company since the 1998 waterfront turmoil.

The company yesterday warned of a hit to Australia's trade reputation and lamented the nation's "illogical" industrial relations framework, ahead of the looming shutdown on Monday of Australia's four biggest port terminals, which form a critical part of the national supply chain.

Alexandra Badenoch, a senior Patrick executive involved in the process, told The Australian enterprise bargaining talks in train since March had stalled over "unrealistic" union claims.

The union's demands for a minimum 32-hour week, paid at a 35-hour week rate, and reinstatement of weekend penalty rates were "out of touch with community standards of what is considered acceptable in an Australian workplace", Ms Badenoch said.

Patrick and the MUA clashed over the company's drive to use more casuals, prompting the union to insist all employees be made full-time permanent in the interests of "job security".

Talks were progressing "cooperatively" last year at ports in Fremantle, Melbourne and Brisbane, Ms Badenoch said, but the process had been "derailed" over the company's Port Botany operation and the "more extreme representatives at that site driving unsustainable asks".

Those claims alone could cost the company a 53 per cent rise in labour costs, it estimated.

The MUA's demand that Patrick reinstate "significant" weekend penalty rates was "turning the clocks back a long way".

"Our industry is a 24/7 industry and we need to accommodate that, and it has to be at a cost base that is sustainable for us," Ms Badenoch said. She blamed highly combative officials within the MUA's Sydney branch for disrupting talks.

"Unfortunately, a very small contingent of the MUA's most militant officials appear intent on winding back the clock to a time when their power to intimidate and interfere in proper commercial arrangements in the narrow pursuit of their own self-interest, and to act with total disregard for their members' best interests or that of the broader community, was as indisputable as it was unacceptable," she said.

"The motivation (of officials) is rebuilding the manning hours at Port Botany ... They are driving membership, and getting more members on the books."

The MUA, which is poised to vote on a merger with the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union at its national council starting on February 29, is accusing Patrick's parent Asciano of seeking to slash labour costs as it prepares to sell the stevedoring business to logistics firm Qube.

One of the union's claims would force a future owner of the business to keep 100 per cent of the workforce.

As about half the nation's containerised imports and exports flow through Patrick's four container terminals, the company warned of "consequences well beyond our terminals' gates" from the strikes.

"The fortunes of countless businesses, both big and small, and the families and communities they support Australia-wide will be adversely affected without timely access to containerised goods," Ms Badenoch said.

"The broader economic harm inflicted will include many immediate and direct costs as well as longer, difficult-to-predict consequences for the nation's trade activity."

Ms Badenoch said the disruption was also hurting Australia's reputation among overseas investors.

"This does nothing for our trade reputation ... we get pretty direct feedback from our customers about service and cost of doing business in Australia," she said.

"Given the rates that our labour costs drive, they express dissatisfaction with that. How easily our operations are disrupted is another source of dissatisfaction."

The union has applied to the Fair Work Commission for protected industrial action for 24 hours on Monday and four hours on Tuesday.

MUA deputy national secretary Will Tracey said: "These stoppages are about ensuring job security as Asciano attempts to sell the Patrick's business. The MUA wants to make sure jobs are not put on the line as part of trying to maximise the asset or share price in this corporate restructuring process."

[Click here to read full story at The Australian](#)

Potato chip boss to workers: "Screw you and your f**king union"

by: C. J. ATKINS, January 8 2016



Photo_ C.J. Atkins_PW

The claim to fame for the Canadian town of Hartland in New Brunswick, population 947, has long been its bridge - the Hartland Bridge, longest covered bridge in the world. But it's not the bridge that is putting Hartland in the news lately. This week people are turning their attention to this small town because of its potato chips. Or to be more precise, because of its potato chip workers.

On Tuesday morning, half of the employees at the Covered Bridge Potato Chip Company walked off the job and hit the picket lines. The workers, who are members of United Food and

Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1288P, have had their union certified for more than two years but have yet to conclude a first contract with their employer.

Speaking to the People's World live via telephone from the the picket line in freezing sub-zero temperatures, UFCW representative Carl Flanagan said that seniority is one of the main issues at stake. He said that company president, Ryan Albright refuses to accept a seniority clause in the contract. "If a new person starts tomorrow, he wants to be able to call that person into work rather than someone whose been there five years. It's favoritism. He wants to do that so everyone will kiss his butt."

Wages are the other primary sticking point. The majority of the workers in the plant are making minimum wage even after years on the job. One striking worker, Betty Demerchant, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation ([CBC](#)), "The wage issue would be minimum wage. I've got a 10-cent raise in almost five years." Demerchant's main job at the plant is cutting potatoes, but she is trained in almost every other job as well.

Demerchant was being paid the New Brunswick minimum wage of \$10 an hour when she got her 10-cent raise. When the province raised the minimum wage to \$10.30, the company only paid her the new minimum. So she actually ended up losing her dime bonus.

The workers are taking strike action after repeated rounds of negotiation with the company have failed to produce an agreement. Although they have been in a legal strike position since June, the workers and their bargaining representatives continued trying to hammer out a deal through the summer and fall. But the company hasn't budged and still refuses to recognize the union.

[According to the official record](#) from the New Brunswick Labour and Employment Board, at a June 23, 2015 bargaining session, Albright said he would never allow his company to operate "in a union environment." He concluded his statement by telling the UFCW representative, "Screw you and your f**king union."

In August, the Labour Board told the company to get back to the table and ruled it had violated at least five sections of the Industrial Relations Act. An order was issued to the company to stop intimidating its workers with threats of dismissal and instructions to quit the union.

Patrick Colford, the president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, told People's World, "We are totally appalled at the disrespect that Mr. Albright has towards his staff and the labour code here in New Brunswick." Commenting on the company's intimidation campaign, he said, "I cannot phantom to imagine what working conditions inside the plant were like before the union was certified." When bargaining finally resumed in September, what did the employer bring? No seniority offer at all, and the wage rate was actually lower than it had been in the first offer. In December, the employer said this was the final offer that would be made.

This left the workers with no alternative. A strike and boycott commenced Tuesday morning.

The company is now bringing in scab labor to continue chip production. The president of Covered Bridge calls the strike "[just a small bump](#) in the road." According to the UFCW, Albright has pledged that strikers will not be allowed back to work, and he is bringing in new hires on condition that they not join the union.

Supporters of the striking workers are being asked not to buy Covered Bridge chips until the company returns to negotiations. In addition to the picket line at the plant, the UFCW is organizing secondary leafleting at supermarkets where Covered Bridge products are sold across Canada: Atlantic Superstore, Sobey's, Costco, Dollarama, and the Great Canadian Dollar Store. In the U.S., Covered Bridge products are also sold under the Aldi, Farmboy, and Metro brands.

In addition to joining in the boycott, the workers at Covered Bridge are asking supporters to send letters to the company's directors and the New Brunswick government using the form on the [UFCW Action Center website](#).

"Stop buying Covered Bridge chips until we can get back to work," Flanagan said. "Albright thinks this strike will end on a dead end street in Hartland, but we're going to keep on going. We're not out to kill the company; we just want him back at the bargaining table."

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