

Free Craig Johnston!!

The jailing of Craig Johnston: a treacherous act

Friday 27 August 2004, has become a very dark day for the trade union movement. It is the day when bosses, governments, the police, the courts and rats from the trade union movement itself, conspired to jail former AMWU State Secretary Craig Johnston. Johnston's only crime was an attempt at saving the jobs of 29 workers who were sacked by an anti-union company called Johnson Tiles.

In an era where almost all industrial action has become 'illegal' these forces are combining to make sure that any effort for workers either to defend themselves or even dare to improve their lot, is quickly quashed. If these forces remain unchecked, the trade union movement's ability to retain wages and conditions will be destroyed.

Who are the real criminals?

The real crime began in 2001 when Johnson Tiles sacked 29 workers and 'outsourced' their jobs to Skilled Engineering. Several of the workers had worked for the company for over 20 years and some have never worked since their retrenchment. Resulting from the dispute, Craig and another 17 union officials and rank and file members from the AMWU and the ETU were charged under criminal law.

For the above 'crime' Craig gets nine months jail.

The courts are prosecuting trade union leaders for defending workers but in contrast no employer ever gets jail sentences for murdering workers.

Companies such as James Hardie Products have killed thousands of people but still not one JHP executive has ever been jailed for these horrendous crimes.

Johnston singled out

From reading the media reports, you'd think that Craig Johnston was the only person involved in the protests. Many people were involved in the protests and 18 were charged. But Craig's 17 co-accused either had all of their charges dismissed or reduced

to the minor charge of unlawful assembly. They were sentenced to a good behaviour bond and a fine.

The prosecutor refused to consider a similar arrangement for Craig, leaving him as the only protester to face charges of verbal abuse, criminal damage and affray. The court never answered the question of how one person can commit affray by themselves.

Why the courts, the state government and the employers targeted Craig

Even though the dispute at Johnson Tiles was lost, the AMWU under Craig Johnston's and Workers First's leadership won enormous increases in wages and conditions for Victorian manufacturing workers since their election in 1998.

In 2000, the AMWU's 'Campaign 2000' saw the introduction of a pattern agreement, putting a stop to the previous leadership's practice of leaving each workplace to fight for its own EBA in isolation. For the first time in many years a majority of AMWU members fought side-by-side to successfully win a 15% wage increase, long service leave after 10 years and income protection. This approach was continued in 2003 to win the 36-hour week in many factories.

The industrial successes of Craig Johnston and the Workers First leadership infuriated the bosses. The bosses wanted to lower the wages and conditions of Victorian workers to the level of the other states.

Heather Ridout from the manufacturing bosses' organisation, the Australian Industry Group, told the *Saturday Age* (22/5/04) that "We talked to his own union about getting rid of him [Craig]..."

Curiously, AMWU National Secretary Doug Cameron, who has been an ardent opponent of Craig Johnston and the Workers First leadership, has been helping the Australian Industry Group by trying to oust Craig from the industry.

Why Craig pleaded guilty

Many people ask why Craig pleaded guilty to some of the charges.

Before the court cases the AMWU organiser who was in charge of the Johnson Tile picket, Zelco Curak turned state's evidence against the other 17 charged. Curak did this with the blessing of the AMWU national office.

Also all the big guns were lined up against Craig – the manufacturing employers, the Bracks government, the Howard government, the media, the ACTU and the national leadership of the AMWU. All of them have stated publicly that they don't want Craig to lead the Victorian AMWU branch and they don't want his example of organised unionism represented in the union movement.

As a result Craig and his lawyers were not convinced that he would get a fair trial given the political nature of the case and Curak's vastly exaggerated account of the affair.

Media reports had already prejudiced Craig's case before his trial was due to begin in May and the AMWU national leadership was openly campaigning against Craig instead of building a campaign to support him.

These were the reasons why Craig decided to plead guilty to the lesser charges once the Department of Public Prosecution (DPP) withdrew the most serious and unsubstantiated charge.

After Craig received a suspended sentence, the anti-trade union movement immediately organised a massive media campaign to have the decision overturned. The DPP's appeal to Craig's suspended sentence led to the nine month jail term that he is now serving.

Dangerous precedents

Because Doug Cameron, the AMWU national leadership and the ACTU have refused to oppose the use of criminal law against unionists instead of industrial law, they have set a dangerous precedent and are inviting much broader attacks against all unionists.

When organising members for better wages and conditions, any decent union is forced to confront the legal restrictions on industrial action, and risk criminal charges. This is the way it is in Howard's Australia.

Why 15 unions supported Craig

In contrast to the ACTU and the AMWU national leadership, 15 of the country's most effective union leaderships are supporting Craig Johnston.

Although many of the 15 unions that are supporting Craig thought that the run-throughs at Skilled

Engineering and Johnson Tiles were a mistake, they do understand that emotions run high when companies throw workers on to the scrap heap.

They recognised the injustice of Johnson Tiles/Skilled Engineering being able to freely strip away workers' livelihoods, while, the unionists who went in to bat for the workers were confronted with criminal charges.

They support union leaderships that selflessly put their own necks on the line to defend their members.

They also support the way Craig unselfishly assists other workers in other industries in their efforts to defend their entitlements, regardless of whether they were workers in the textile industry, in construction or postal services under the motto "Touch one, touch all".

The Free Craig Johnston Committee is calling on all workers to:

- Photocopy and circulate this leaflet as widely as possible.
- Pass motions condemning the jailing of Craig Johnston in your workplace and at union leadership meetings. That is shop stewards meetings, branch meetings, branch council meetings etc. The motion should ask for your union, the ACTU and VTHC to initiate or get involved with a campaign to release Craig. (please forward all motions to the Free Craig Johnston Committee)
- Ask your unions and union organisers what they are doing to secure Craig's release from jail.
- Place your name on the FCJC contact sheet and participate in the FCJC meetings.
- Be ready for the call to action when announced.

Unlike Cameron and co, honest fair dinkum unionists take disagreements and contentious issues to the members, not to the police and the courts. Union members must decide the fate for Craig Johnston.

Published by the Free Craig Johnston Committee

Send messages of support to Craig Johnston at: PO Box 12263, A'Beckett St, Melbourne Vic 3006
For information phone Sue Bolton on 0413 377978