



Picketers vow to stay as rival gas workers sign up

EXCLUSIVE

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Unions have vowed to maintain a 340-day picket at ExxonMobil's Longford gas plant in Victoria after a replacement maintenance workforce went against a union recommendation and backed a new enterprise agreement.

Unions set up the picket almost a year ago in protest at a controversial but legal strategy by contractor UGL, saying it had reduced wages significantly and cut the conditions of workers at the plant.

UGL established a subsidiary, MTCT, and registered a new agreement approved by five workers in Western Australia. Unions said the Longford workers were told they would sign up to the lower-paying agreement.

Most of the 230 workers refused and MTCT employed a contract workforce that is engaged at Longford and offshore. The replacement workers have been regularly carried in buses with blackened windows through the picket, which has featured in the ACTU's "change the rules" campaign.

Replacement workers voted in favour of the new three-year agreement that offered annual 2 per cent pay rises. While an improvement on the recent agreement, unions said it offered 20 to 40 per cent less than previous deals.

Speaking on behalf of the company, the Australian Mines and Metals Association said yesterday the vote presented a challenge to

the ACTU campaign.

"We hope the message this outcome sends is received by those elements of the union movement which are increasingly trying to link local community industrial negotiations to their broader

political campaigns," said AMMA director of workplace relations Amanda Mansini. "Working Australians are entitled to have their say on the terms and conditions they want, and in the Bass Strait they just have. We can only hope the unions will now suspend their political campaign and support the views of the majority of these working Australians."

Australian Workers Union organiser Jeff Sharp rejected the claims, saying most of the replacement workforce was from Melbourne, interstate or overseas, and lacked the skills and experience of the displaced workers. Before the vote, the union circulated material labelling the new offer "fool's gold". It urged a no vote, saying the offer lacked many previous conditions and arrangements.

Mr Sharp said about 40 of the 230 workers had returned to work over the past year, including some who had been on the picket for months, which angered the remaining picketers.

"They are filthy on it," he said. "It undermines their position. Some of those guys who went back spent six months on the picket and

now they are being driven in on blackened-out buses. If people condone this sort of behaviour, it

makes it easier for these rogue employers to continue their practice."

Mr Sharp said the picketers had received extraordinary support from locals, who had brought them firewood and baked cakes.

Given many were not working, he said unions had provided them with significant financial assistance and he believed the picket could be maintained for at least another six months.

Mr Sharp said the dispute showed why the Fair Work Act had to be changed — because the workers had no legal redress.

"We will continue to campaign about what has been done here," he said. "You have an agreement voted on by five workers who never worked here and then it is funnelled out to other sites across the country. This is borderline fraud."

He said Labor leader Bill Shorten organised the Longford site when he was at the Australian Workers Union. The ALP has promised to change the law if it wins office to prevent employers using the same tactics.



STUART MCEVOY

AWU organiser Jeff Sharp with the picketers yesterday