

# **Oppose the Frame-Up of John Setka, Defend the CFMMEU!**

## **Government Hands Off the Unions!**

JULY 10: The bosses and their newly re-elected union-busting Liberal/National Coalition government have been baying for the blood of John Setka, secretary of the Victorian construction division of the CFMMEU (previously CFMEU). Seizing on lies leaked in the bourgeois media that Setka had

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### **For a Class-Struggle Fight Against the Bosses' Attacks!**

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denigrated prominent domestic violence campaigner Rosie Batty at a CFMMEU national executive meeting in early June, the bosses and their media scribes have demanded his sacking. At the same time, adding to the frenzy, were reports of nasty text messages at the centre of harassment charges related to Setka's personal life and poisonous insinuations that he was a perpetrator of domestic violence. In their quest to behead this militant union, the bourgeoisie quickly gained the energetic support of the ALP tops and the ACTU labour lieutenants of capital.

In the face of this frame-up, Setka resolutely denied the allegations regarding Batty. He was backed by other officials who were at the union meeting. His wife strongly refuted the imputation of domestic violence. The whole point of the campaign against Setka is to drive out a combative union leader and place the CFMMEU and other unions under increased state control. The persecution of John Setka is not only a threat to the construction union but the entire labour movement.

Taking particular aim at the CFMMEU, the Morrison government seized the opportunity to reintroduce the Ensuring Integrity Bill that was previously defeated in the Senate. This draconian bill gives the state the power to deregister unions for "unlawful" actions or ban their leaders for not being "fit and proper" persons. Feeling the wind in their sails, the government now openly talks about attacking working conditions across the board. We say: To hell with the union-busting government and their lackey Labor traitors! Government hands off the unions! We need a class-struggle fight against the bosses' attacks!

For decades the CFMMEU has faced a relentless state vendetta as the profit-hungry bosses seek to smash the powerful union and criminalise militant unionism in order to drive down wages and con-

ditions. After two witchhunting royal commissions and a decade of the anti-union Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) star chamber, the union has seen state offices raided by police and scores of officials and hundreds of members charged over industrial action that the state deems "unlawful." At the same time, the union has paid millions in fines, legal fees and settlements while being endlessly tied up in the courts.

John Setka has been a particular target in the anti-union campaign. With a union history going back to the militant Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in the 1980s, he has incurred numerous convictions for defending picket lines, including the 2012 mass picket of the union-busting Grocon company's Emporium site in Melbourne. While Setka has put his body on the line in defence of the union, as with the rest of the union bureaucracy he remains wedded to the program of Laborism which is marked by its nationalism, protectionism and reliance on the capitalist state. Corraling his members behind the traitorous Labor tops, as in the November Victorian elections, Setka embraces the pro-capitalist Laborite program that subordinates workers to the rule of the profit-gouging bosses.

The union tops' Laborite program was exemplified in the Grocon dispute. Rather than harnessing the felt anger of the workers in a fight to shut down all Grocon sites, the union bureaucrats, including Setka who was then assistant state secretary, pulled down the Emporium picket and sold out the struggle by allowing it to be buried in the bosses' courts. This was a watershed for the union, resulting in a massive union payout to Grocon and the expansion of its anti-union operation.

The union tops' abject capitulation during the Grocon struggle only emboldened the vindictive bosses. In 2015, Setka, by then state secretary of the branch, and his deputy, Shaun Reardon, were arrested on trumped-up "blackmail" charges for allegedly threatening to escalate black bans during the Grocon struggle. In a highly-orchestrated arrest, Setka was hauled off the street in front of his family by two car loads of armed federal and state police. When Setka and Reardon fronted court two days later, thousands of construction workers downed tools and converged outside in defiant protest. While quickly released on bail, the two union leaders remained under threat of 15 years' jail for over two years. The bogus charges were only dropped in May last year, days after more

than 100,000 workers protested on Melbourne streets against anti-union laws, including marching past the courthouse where Reardon and Setka's case was being heard.

When, at a union rally in 2017, Setka threatened to expose and shame ABCC spooks and inquisitors, the government declared the union "out of control." Last year, tweets by Setka targeting the ABCC and anti-union laws elicited a threat by the prime minister to ban the union. In the 1980s, Labor "icon" Bob Hawke provided the precedent for the likes of Morrison when his government smashed the militant BLF. Serving the bosses to the end, Hawke called on the ALP/ACTU to cut ties with the CFMEU only a few years before he died in May.

### **ALP Tops/ACTU: Running Dogs of Bosses**

Using the very real issue of violence against women, and in today's #MeToo climate of trial by media, the bosses and their government finally thought they had a way to nail Setka. Taking his cue from the bosses, the new ALP Opposition leader, Anthony Albanese, suspended Setka's ALP membership citing his "denigration" of Batty and has moved to expel him from the party. Fuelling Albanese's push, at the very union executive meeting in question, Setka flagged his branch's intention to withhold further funding to the ALP following their ignominious defeat at the May federal election. This was no doubt the last straw for ALP heavies, particularly after Setka had already labelled former ALP prime minister Kevin Rudd a "maggot" for reneging on a pre-election promise to abolish the ABCC.

Albanese's move is cut from the same cloth as Rudd's expulsion of leading West Australian CFMEU official Joe McDonald in 2007 for industrial "thuggery." In pushing to jettison Setka from the ALP, Albanese is making clear that he is a reliable servant of capitalist class rule and will not tolerate anything smacking of militant unionism. Based on the unions but committed to the business of running capitalism, the ALP readily sacrifices unionists who step out of line in order to prove its loyalty to the bosses.

As for ACTU Secretary Sally McManus, like Albanese she frets that the CFMMEU is damaging the ALP and union movement's "reputation." In June, this former *enfant terrible* flew back from a meeting of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva to demand Setka resign from his union post. After the allegations against Setka about Batty were refuted by others at the union executive meeting, McManus changed tack and called for his resignation because of the court charges he was to face. Backed by 13 unions, McManus then said Setka should fall on his sword in the hope of forestalling the Morrison government's reintroduction of its anti-union bill. However, far from appeasing the bosses, such treachery has only fuelled their anti-union agenda.

Refusing to kowtow to demands that he resign, Setka has been backed by the CFMMEU national union (construction division) and several Victorian blue-collar unions, including the Electrical Trades Union. In defending Setka, West Australian branch

secretary of the maritime union, Chris Cain, suggested perhaps Albanese should resign instead. At a 12 June joint press conference with Setka, his wife, Emma Walters, called for an end to the politically-motivated campaign to "Get John Setka." An articulate lawyer and self-described feminist, she courageously spoke of repairing a relationship torn apart under the relentless crusade against the CFMMEU and her husband.

Following police prosecutors withdrawing some 30 charges, in late June Setka pleaded guilty to two charges—"using a carriage service to harass" his wife and "breaching a court order." Following the court hearing, Walters issued a powerful statement in solidarity with her husband and the construction union. Noting they had "both [been] in a really dark place after years of intense pressure," she forthrightly took on media insinuations of domestic violence, stating "there has never been any form of physical violence in our marriage or in our home." Indeed it is Setka and his family that have been subjected to relentless harassment and abuse by the bosses and their state.

To effectively defend Setka and the CFMMEU requires mobilising the social power of the workers in class struggle. Such a perspective is anathema for the reformist opponents of Marxism. To date, Socialist Alternative and the Socialist Party have not published any defence of Setka or the union. While Socialist Alliance (SA) claim to "Defend the CFMMEU" and Solidarity writes that "Albanese is doing the bosses' dirty work," both groups have outrageously embraced the bosses' domestic violence frame-up of Setka and demanded that he resign! This craven capitulation to the pro-capitalist ALP and ACTU tops renders these reformists incapable of even a basic defence of the union movement.

Tailing the ACTU tops, SA and Solidarity argue that if the unions seriously want to oppose domestic violence and champion women's rights then Setka must go. This is a crock! The attack on Setka is an attack on the unions, and this can only be injurious to women workers. For decades the contraction of union power has resulted in an increase in the bosses' profits as wages and conditions across the board have been driven down. This has hit working women hard, forcing many into part-time, casual and contract work or unemployment, where they are increasingly thrown into poverty and ensnared in the suffocating confines of the family. The bosses, in turn, use the growing pool of impoverished workers to further drive down the conditions of all. In counterposition to Solidarity and SA, we say that all workers—women and men—have a stake in opposing the campaign against Setka and in the fight to defend and extend union power as part of the fight to get rid of this brutal, exploitative system.

### **Capitalist Rule: Anti-Worker, Anti-Women**

Setka's persecutors seek to make an amalgam between actual domestic violence and unsavoury behaviour, such as the reported content of his text messages. This in fact trivialises the very real crime of anti-woman violence that is so prevalent in this brutal,

misogynist society. Today, on average, one woman is murdered every week by her partner or ex-partner.

Australian capitalism's origins as a penal colony imprinted it with a particular brutishness from the beginning, not least towards women. Today, the horrific incidence of domestic violence, alongside numerous heinous cases of rape and murder of young women on the streets, have rightly sparked outrage by many. However, anger and grief has been channelled into bourgeois schemes to improve "men's behaviour" and for "crime prevention." Such schemes in fact do nothing to end the prevalence of violence against women. Instead they often foster reliance on the capitalist state and bolster its police and judicial powers.

Consisting at its core of the military, cops and prisons, the state is nothing other than an apparatus of coercion to defend the class rule and profits of the filthy rich capitalists against the working class and oppressed. To sow illusions that this state can protect workers and minorities is deadly dangerous. Defence of women and children was the pretext for the police and military occupation of Northern Territory Aboriginal communities in 2007. This naked land grab marked a major escalation in the criminalisation and imprisonment of Aboriginal people and the state abduction of Aboriginal children from their families, compounding the misery already imposed on Aboriginal people.

Pervasive in this capitalist society is the feminist myth that the oppression of women is simply the result of bad attitudes in the heads of men. In reality, anti-woman bigotry and oppression has a *material* basis in capitalist society, with the institutions of the family and the church acting as crucial props of the state. For the working class, the family is meant to serve as the means of rearing the next generation of compliant wage slaves (and cannon fodder for future wars). The family also reinforces the economic dependence of women and children on men. The ideology of the male breadwinner, marriage for life, the cosy nest of child-rearing, comes up against the harsh realities of life under capitalism, including the basic struggle to make ends meet. The family under capitalism is a breeding ground for all sorts of pathologies.

### **For a Revolutionary Workers Party!**

Over the last 40 years, alongside union-busting attacks, casualisation of the workforce and driving down workers' wages and conditions, both Liberal and Labor governments alike have relentlessly slashed at social services, particularly targeting women, the poor, the elderly and the sick. Indeed, the Rudd/Gillard Labor governments, in which Albanese

served as a minister, presided over an increase in child-care costs, and a crumbling public health system. The gap between women's and men's wages widened and homelessness (including of women) increased.

With the acquiescence of the union misleaders, women workers in this country are concentrated in the lowest paid sectors, with 27 percent toiling in casual jobs. In fighting for the rights of all working people, the unions must champion women's rights, including free quality 24-hour childcare, free quality medical care at the point of delivery and the right to abortion on demand. To help revitalise the declining union movement, the unions need a class-struggle leadership that would fight to organise the unorganised, for decent hours at union pay and conditions, for equal pay for equal work, and union control of hiring with special union-run programs to open up skilled trades to women, youth and oppressed minorities. Taken together such measures would go a long way to addressing the precarious economic position that makes working-class women so vulnerable.

To tackle chronic unemployment and under-employment, a class-struggle leadership of the unions would also fight for a shorter work week with no loss in pay to spread the available work around. However, providing all with even the basic necessities of life—decent jobs, free quality secular education and health care, decent affordable housing and public transport—will require a workers state with a planned collectivised economy where production is organised for the needs of society not for capitalist profit. Only through collectivising the social functions of the family, such as childcare and housework, will women be emancipated to play a full and equal role in social and political life.

With its numbers, organisation, and role in production, the proletariat is the only class with the social power to lead the fight to sweep away bourgeois rule. To fulfil its historic role, workers need a revolutionary party, a tribune of the people, centred on the most class-conscious workers and capable of organising the proletariat in defence of all victims of capitalist oppression. Such a party will be linked to a class-struggle leadership of the unions, forged in irreconcilable struggle against the nationalism and fealty to the state that defines Laborism. Our defence of John Setka and the CFMMEU is a basic defence of the unions, the elementary economic defence organisations of the working class. It is part of our battle to forge the necessary revolutionary workers party that will fight to overthrow the whole rotting capitalist system through workers revolution. ■

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