

Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

New assault against labor

The government plans to emasculate the Industrial Relations Commission and to break the Maritime Union.

Australia's unique industrial relations system is headed for a shake-up, following the Howard government's announcement of a "second wave" of industrial relations "reforms." The announcement was made by Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith on Dec. 30, the eve of the first anniversary of the government's Workplace Relations Act. The WRA, which established the practice of "individual employee contracts" with employers, was the first wave in the government's campaign to smash trade unions in Australia. The targets of this "second wave" are the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and, it is widely rumored, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), the independent arbitrator between unions and employees. Both the AIRC and the MUA have posed obstacles to attempts by the government, multinational mining companies, and the Mont Pelerin Society's anti-union front, the H.R. Nicholls Society, to de-unionize the Australian workforce.

The AIRC is the umpire in the Australian industrial relations system. Under law, it has the power to approve wage rates and conditions, intervene in disputes, and impose settlements. It is the AIRC's power to intervene, for instance, to order unions and a company to continue talking in an attempt to settle differences, which is rumored to be specifically under threat by Reith. In 1997, the AIRC ordered Rio Tinto and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) to resume discussions, after Rio Tinto provoked a strike at its Hunter Valley No. 1 mine in New South Wales. That intervention enraged both the govern-

ment and Rio Tinto, which had intended to use the strike as a test case for the new Workplace Relations Act. The government had appointed Rio Tinto executive Mike Angwin to the three-person panel which drafted the Act in the first place; Angwin then was dispatched as Rio Tinto's chief executive to Hunter Valley, where he provoked the strike.

The government has already moved to weaken the AIRC from within, even before the second wave of reforms. In December, Reith announced the appointment of industrial relations lawyer Jeff Guidice as the AIRC's new head. As a lawyer, Guidice had represented Rio Tinto in industrial disputes on no less than 17 different occasions; now, the fox will guard the chicken coop. Coinciding with Guidice's appointment, the full bench of the AIRC voted on Dec. 23 to "simplify" the industrial award—the agreements that detail the benefits employers are obliged to provide their workforce—covering the hospitality industry, by stripping numerous benefits, such as extra pay for working Sundays and holidays. The government applauded the decision as "an encouraging start" to stripping awards in all industries, while the Opposition Labor Party condemned it as "a lousy Christmas present for 3 million Australian workers."

The government has made clear that its other main industrial relations focus for the coming year, in the name of "waterfront reform," is to crush the Maritime Union of Australia. The model for this is New Zealand, where the Labour government and the Mont Pelerin Society's

Business Roundtable smashed the Waterfront Workers Union in 1989. Now, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Jan. 6, "The men must now work any hour of the day, any day of the week, and are paid a flat hourly rate. The closed shop has been busted open, and perks, penalties, and strikes are things of the past." As part of his plan to crush the MUA, Reith also announced that he was prepared to confront the 5 million-member International Federation of Transport Unions, one of the most powerful industrial organizations in the world. The IFTU provided crucial backup to the MUA in a dispute on the wharf in Cairns in September, when a Freeport McMoRan and Rio Tinto subsidiary tried to bring in nonunion labor to unload ships, and then again in November-December to stop a plan to employ SAS mercenaries on the Melbourne docks, instead of MUA members. In both cases, the IFTU threatened international boycotts, and overturned the strikebreaking plans.

A key player in the Howard government's fanaticism to eliminate Australian unions was revealed on Dec. 22, when the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) forced the mysterious Cormack Foundation—the chief source of funds for the ruling Liberal Party—to declare where its money comes from. Prominent amongst the formerly anonymous donors are Rio Tinto's former Australian subsidiary (now merged into Rio Tinto), CRA, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, notorious for smashing the printers union in England. AEC records also show that, besides funding the Liberal Party, Cormack pours funds into three local fronts of the Mont Pelerin Society, the chief economic warfare body of the British Crown, which designed the Thatcherite union-smashing policies in Britain, as well as in New Zealand.