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Australian Unions question Turnbull Government interference in running of Federal workplace watchdog

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) are openly questioning the political motivations of the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) after the Turnbull Government agency announced it was seeking \$10,800 fines for nine workers woken up at 1am, marched out of their workplace and dumped on the Portland, Victoria, wharf in January 2016.

Five of the nine workers charged were removed from the ship MV Portland after having been previously told by Alcoa that they were to sail the vessel to Singapore in order to be sacked, despite the fact the vessel had worked the Australian coast for 27 years.

None of the workers have been able to find stable employment since the Turnbull Government inexplicably issued Alcoa with a so-called Temporary License, which was renewed late last year.

According to documents leaked to the media before the workers were told, the FWO is seeking:

- Penalties against nine crew members for \$10,800 each
- Penalties against the union of \$54,000
- Compensation of \$500,000 to be paid by the MUA to Alcoa

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Ged Kearney:

"It is a national disgrace that a Turnbull Government agency is trying to prosecute workers for standing up for their jobs."

"This legal action is designed to harm Australian workers in favour of tax avoidance, workplace bullying and harassment and exploitative use of guest labour in our country."

"There should be an inquiry into the political use of the Fair Work Ombudsman by the Turnbull Government because there appears to be a conspiracy against these workers."

Quotes attributable to MUA National Secretary and International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) President Paddy Crumlin:

"Alcoa's actions have been condemned by the MUA, ITF and seafarer unions around the world as an abusive attack on Australian seafarers' legal and national rights to work."

"Instead of cuddling up to this outrageous corporate behaviour by Alcoa the Fair Work Ombudsman is prosecuting hardworking Australian citizens who have always paid their taxes and taken no industrial action in this long-standing national shipping route over the last 27 years."

"The MUA will always defend any member who is dragged from their bunk at 1am while at work by dozens of security guards, given five minutes to pack their bags, and then unceremoniously dumped on the wharf."

"These hardworking Australian seafarers have been replaced by Flag-of-Convenience shipping which pays exploited foreign workers as little as \$2 an hour and registers ships in places like Liberia, Mongolia and Panama as part of one of the biggest tax avoidance scams on the planet."

"One of the replacement vessels for the MV Portland even got busted paying bribes in Nigeria and Argentina. What is going on here?"

Quotes attributable to MUA Assistant National Secretary Ian Bray:

“It is of little surprise that a heavily politicised agency like the Fair Work Ombudsman tells the media before the union. The MUA admits to no wrongdoing and will vigorously defend these charges.”

"Australians should have the right to work in their own country and not be treated like dirt by unscrupulous employers and a Federal Government that backed them every single step of the way."

“The MUA also notes that the same employer has since received \$230 million in subsidies to continue the Portland smelter yet still runs Flag-of-Convenience ships with exploited foreign crews on the run that had been serviced by the MV Portland for 27 years prior.”

“All of the seafarers from the MV Portland remain unemployed and it beggars belief that a Government agency seek to punish them to the tune of \$10,800 each when that agency should instead have found ways for them to keep their jobs."

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<http://www.actu.org.au/actu-media/media-releases>