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Police are enemies of the labour movement

Sarah Missen

June 24, 2020

Since the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis, there has been renewed discussion about police brutality around the world. Here in Australia, much of that conversation and activism has rightly focused on the abysmal record of racist policing and deaths in custody inflicted upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For trade unionists in Australia, this has brought up another old and uncomfortable question – the position of police within the labour movement.

Every state and territory has a police union, and together they form the Police Federation of Australia. These unions are affiliated to the ACTU, the Victorian Trades Hall Council, Unions NSW and the Queensland Council of Unions.

By allowing these affiliations to stand, the union bureaucracy is consenting to the police being part of our movement, privy to our organising, and part of our decision making bodies. But while they benefit from these affiliations, they do not (and cannot) demonstrate working class solidarity.

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Police are not workers. Police protect and serve capital and the state, not workers. When police organise through “unions” they are not only organising to increase their material condition, but to finance the protection of their members against the legal consequences of their often violent behaviour. They also act as a powerful lobbyist to governments for more police powers – which they then use against the working class.

Throughout the history of Australia, police have broken up and crossed picket lines, and have injured, attacked and killed workers during industrial disputes. If cops aren’t actively strikebreaking at the behest of governments and bosses, then they are facilitating the use of scabs, or trying to provoke workers into violent acts they can then retaliate against.

For example:

In **1892** during the Broken Hill Miners Strike, the bosses were concerned about violence against scabs, and so enlisted the assistance of the police in escorting scabs from the train station into town. As tensions rose during the strike, police attended a strike committee meeting with rifles and bayonets.

In **1894** during the Shearer’s Strike, police again protected scabs. They also arrested the leaders of the strike which resulted in 13 being sentenced to three years of hard labour. The legitimacy of these arrests is still questioned today.

In **1908–09** during another dispute in Broken Hill, police spent a fortnight trying to provoke violence from striking workers, including by pretending to be scabs. When their provocations didn’t work, they kettled the striking workers, batoning them and arresting 28.

In **1919**, during the Townsville Meatworkers Strike, workers were flogged with bullwhips by mounted troopers. Then following the arrest of two men, workers and their families

- went to protest outside the lockup and the police started firing indiscriminately into the crowd – 16 were wounded.
- In **1919** during the Fremantle Wharf Riot, Waterside Workers Federation member and worker Tom Edwards was struck on the head by a police baton and died three days later in hospital.
- In 1928, one of the 27 armed Vic Police, escorting scabs, shot and killed a Melbourne wharfie, Allan Whittaker, at a picket line in November. Allan, a WWI veteran, was one of a thousand wharfies protesting scab labour at Princes Pier, Port Melbourne. He was shot and killed at close range with a police revolver.
- In **1929** what would be called the Rothbury Riot occurred. Following the introduction of non-union labour into the mine, workers charged the site gate and were batoned by police. Three shots were allegedly fired in the direction of the police, and the police responded by firing into the crowd. One miner, Norman Brown died from a fatal wound from a ricocheting bullet.
- In **1933** in Melbourne police targeted members of the Unemployed Workers Movement and arrested and assaulted them for holding meetings, organising and making speeches in public. One UWM activist Shorty Patullo was shot by police while giving a speech from on top of a tram.
- In **1948** during the Queensland Railway Strike the state government brought in the Industrial Law Amendment Act which gave police the ability to arrest without warrant and enter homes without cause. In response, workers rallied on St Patrick's Day and were attacked by police with batons. Two men were hospitalised, and injuries included scalp lacerations, brain damage, concussion and shock.
- In **1957**, the Palm Island General Strike occurred due to racist government policies and policing. Palm Island workers demand increased wages, better food and for the Superintendent to be removed. On the fifth day of the strike, the police

moved in at 4am, smashing down doors of homes, handcuffing strike leaders and deporting them and their families to the mainland.

- In **1961** migrants at the Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre protested, chanting “we want work!” After throwing stones and some damage to building the demonstration was “dispersed” by a police baton charge.
- In **1973** during the Green Ban on the Rocks in Sydney, demolition commenced in Victoria Street. The Premier ordered police to facilitate the work of scab labourers, but upon arriving they found the site occupied and barricaded by the BLF and activists. The police roughly arrested 58 unionists and activists.
- In **1986** during the Nurses Strike, fifty police dragged picketers at the Royal Melbourne Hospital across gravel. Workers were bruised and choked. The police also escorted linen vans (deemed non-essential) through the picket on two occasions.
- In **1994** police broke up picket lines at Franklins’ warehouses during a dispute. In one incident in Chullora 21 workers were arrested and 12 injured.
- In **2002**, BHP called in the riot police to break a union picket at its factory in Western Port. 30 workers were attacked by 100 police, including the mounted division. One worker received serious injuries during the attack.
- In **2010**, 29 workers were arrested for “besetting a premises” (a picket line) at Visy’s factory in Dandenong. The workers were forcibly removed by police.
- In **2011**, police attempted to smash a picket line at a Baiada poultry processing site in Melbourne. While unsuccessful, one worker was seriously injured sustaining a broken thigh bone.
- In **2012**, police used horses and capscicum spray in an attempt to smash a picket on a Grocon site in Melbourne.

On this brief and violent record alone, any unionist would wonder why we let these people participate in our movement, when they are hellbent on siding with bosses and governments, and inflicting violence upon workers. Solidarity should be the first criterion for affiliation, not an optional extra.

Solidarity at this time of critical reflection on policing should be with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, black, migrant and other comrades of colour who are targeted by racist police, not with the so-called unions of the racist police.

Police unions should be kicked out of the labour movement, and workers should wholeheartedly join the struggle to make police obsolete.