

## Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick and Allen Douglas

### Secret plot against the unions

*The Mont Pelerin Society, Rio Tinto, P&O, and the Federal government have drafted plans to wipe out the union movement.*

In the third week of August, an uproar exploded over the Liberal government's plans to destroy the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), one of the nation's strongest. According to reports leaked to the media, the government hired a radical anti-union consulting firm, ACIL, to tell it how it could wipe out the MUA. The waterfront is 100% unionized, and the MUA has staunchly supported other unions in their strikes. Eliminating the MUA would go far toward breaking unions in the country overall.

The government gave ACIL \$60,000 for an initial study, and then awarded it a second, \$800,000 contract, without publicly tendering the bid. ACIL has studied the legalities of forcing striking MUA workers back to work; the hiring of new, non-union workers; the seizure of union assets in the event of fines; and has assessed which unions might back up the MUA in a showdown.

The timing of the government's plans to smash the MUA is not accidental: Two bitter strikes are presently under way at coal mines in Queensland, both of which are seen as precedents for the destruction of union power. At issue here is not merely "union matters," but an attack by the union-busters on the Australian nation-state itself.

In March 1996, the Liberal-National coalition government of John Howard replaced the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, which had ruled Australia since 1983. Though Hawke and Keating had introduced deregulation, privatization, free trade, and other measures which savaged the Australian econ-

omy and led to a soaring foreign debt (now US\$170 billion), they had not dared to smash the trade unions—though Keating had proclaimed to his friend Lord Alistair McAlpine, the treasurer of Britain's Conservative Party for 15 years under Margaret Thatcher, that "I am going to tear the trade unions apart, tear them up."

Since its inception in the 1890s, the Labor Party was built by the unions; in turn, it was the party that largely built Australia, through Labor's founding of a national bank in 1911, and Labor Prime Minister John Curtin's break with Winston Churchill in World War II to ally with America (instead of Australia being ceded to Japan, as Churchill had planned), among other policies. What Labor did for the nation, was usually over the opposition of conservative, Anglophile parties. Now, the showdown has begun. The Howard government was installed, with immense financial support of Australia's banks and corporations, for one main purpose: to eliminate the unions.

Howard's government is dominated by members of think-tanks spawned by the chief economic warfare unit of the British Crown, the Mont Pelerin Society, in particular the fanatically anti-labor H.R. Nicholls Society. Immediately upon taking office, Howard appointed a three-man task force on "industrial relations" to recommend "workplace reforms." One member of this task force, Paul Houlihan, is a member of the H.R. Nicholls Society, while a second, Mike Angwin, is an executive of Rio Tinto, the second-largest mining company in the world. This task force drafted the

"Workplace Relations Act," which allows unions to be replaced with individual worker contracts with the employer. The act also banned one of the unions' most powerful measures of self-defense: secondary boycotts. The ACIL and its friends have approached Defense Minister Ian MacLachlan, a founding member of the H.R. Nicholls Society, about using troops to break strikes.

Two corporations, in particular, have collaborated with the Howard government in these plans: Rio Tinto and P&O Ports, both pillars of the British Empire for over a hundred years, and involved in some of its dirtiest dope and free trade operations. Rio Tinto, in which Queen Elizabeth II owns a major share, has been the chief backer of the "Aboriginal land rights" plot to splinter Australia, while P&O Ports is a subsidiary of the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Co., founded by the Baring family of Barings Bank, to run drugs into China in the last century. P&O has reportedly already costed out a plan to hire a new, nonunion workforce in the event of a waterfront strike—an unprecedented act.

For its part, Rio Tinto has provoked one of the two bitter strikes now under way in the nation's coal mines, that at Rio Tinto's Hunter Valley No. 1 mine in New South Wales, with the express purpose of eliminating the unions. On Aug. 21, Rio Tinto threatened to sack all 430 union workers at the mine, which would provoke industrial action all over Australia, including at the waterfront. This would then give the government the opportunity to prosecute the unions, under the secondary boycott laws.

Meanwhile, the H.R. Nicholls Society is keeping the government's feet to the fire: On Aug. 21, the society issued a tract, *Mission Abandoned*, which slashed the government for not attacking the unions hard enough.