

FREMANTLE PORT — MARITIME UNION OF AUSTRALIA — INDUSTRIAL ACTION

**Dr M.D. NAHAN to the Minister for Transport:**

I note that industrial action will potentially shut down the port of Fremantle for two days this week. Can the minister advise the house of the significance of this stoppage and the views, if any, of the federal Labor government?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL replied:**

I thank the member. This is a very important issue in Western Australia. In fact, it is a very important and emerging issue right around Australia. Western Australia, the economic powerhouse of the nation, relies on its capacity to export. We exports through our ports. What we have seen over the past six months or so has been a concerted effort by the Maritime Union of Australia to effectively shut down certain targeted Western Australian ports. Fremantle port, for example, is, if my memory services me correctly, Australia's tenth largest port by trade volume. It handles nearly 600 000 20-foot equivalent container units a year. It is of huge significance to the state's economy but, more importantly, is of massive significance for the economy of the South West and the metropolitan area. Very few of the imported goods that Western Australians will buy in the lead-up to Christmas will not have come through the port of Fremantle. What we are seeing is an ongoing negotiation between the MUA, representing a small group of workers at Fremantle—24 workers—and the port of Fremantle. Those 24 workers and the small craft fleet drive the pilots out to the ships and operate the control tower that operates the movement of vessels around the port. Those 24 workers and the incredibly militant Maritime Union of Australia can effectively bring the port of Fremantle to its knees.

Let me give members some background about the negotiations. Effectively, the claim from the MUA, which has been watered down from its original 100 per cent-plus impact on wages, if accepted, would push up wage costs at the port by 56 per cent over the next three years. That 56 per cent is made of up 12 per cent by way of a wage claim. The MUA is arguing for changes to be made to the roster so that the workers would go from working four days on and four days off to only four days on, six days off. That would add 34 per cent to wage costs, and there are a range of other overtime and incidental claims. The port has made what I think is a very fair and reasonable offer of a 4.75 per cent per annum increase over the next three years. The four per cent is guaranteed and the 0.75 per cent per annum would be subject to meeting certain key performance indicators, which, ironically, would require an improvement in productivity—heaven forbid!

Let me give members an example, without labouring the point, of some of the work practices at Fremantle port. When a container is brought off a ship, it is picked up by the lifter and put on the port. If that container is to go on a train to Kewdale, the container is picked up and put on the back of a truck. The truck leaves the port, drives out one entrance and around the corner through another entrance and the container is dropped off in the rail yard, which is about 100 metres from where it was previously picked up. It is then picked up by someone else and put onto the back of the train. These are the sorts of work practices that do not exist in modern contemporary ports anywhere else around the world. Containers are being picked up and put on a truck when they can be driven across using the container lift and put straight onto the back of a train.

These are the sorts of problems that the port is confronted with, yet the union wants this massive increase in pay and/or conditions with absolutely no reflected change in productivity. The union has approached Fair Work Australia. It is now in what is called "protected industrial action". That means that Julia Gillard's industrial relations system —

**Ms J.M. Freeman:** No, it's not; it's Howard's laws.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I will give you a tip, member for Nollamara: this would not have happened under the Howard government. There is absolutely no way that the ports of Western Australia —

**Mr F.M. Logan:** You would have been bringing in ratbags from Dubai! That's what Howard did!

**Dr M.D. Nahan:** That was from the UK!

**Mr D.T. Redman:** Did *Hansard* get that?

**The SPEAKER:** Three more strikes and you can go to Dubai, member for Cockburn. Minister for Agriculture and Food, I formally call you to order for the first time. Member for Riverton, I do not necessarily know that you need to correct anybody's pronunciation in this place. I formally call you to order.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** Thank you, Mr Spruiker—a pronunciation problem; it can happen to any of us, Mr Speaker!

That gets us to the point: legally sanctioned industrial action was taken to shut down the port of Fremantle for two days, which could affect 34 ship movements and cost \$150 million. That concerns me. Obviously it does not concern members opposite. Members opposite do not care that the state's economy grinds to a halt. They do not care that 24 workers and a militant union can hold to ransom the people of Western Australia; do they? No, they do not care about that sort of stuff.

Several members interjected.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** It is, members opposite, because they donate to your election campaign.

**Mr F.M. Logan:** Get on and resolve it!

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** Member for Cockburn—the workers' friend—to assist in the resolution I wrote to Julia Gillard. I said, "We've got a bit of an issue here, Julia, Prime Minister. Our ports are about to shut down. It'll have a huge impact on Western Australia. We're asking you to assist Western Australia and make representations to Fair Work Australia to remove the protected status of that action so that the port will not shut."

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** Have you made those representations?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I have written to her.

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** No; to Fair Work Australia?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** No.

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** So you haven't gone to Fair Work Australia!

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** No, I have not.

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** Why not?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I will tell the Leader of the Opposition why not. It is because Fair Work Australia has sanctioned the action. Why would I write to Fair Work Australia when a couple of weeks ago it said it was perfectly legal and perfectly normal?

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** Why wouldn't you write to Fair Work Australia?

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** It is because it operates in a framework that is bad for productivity, bad for Western Australia and bad for the long-term economic future of Australia. Julia Gillard's response was this: "I don't want to know about it. I have no responsibility for it. I don't care and you can fend for yourselves in Western Australia." It is just another example of a federal government which is prepared to tax this state to the hilt, and is prepared to claim all the credit for the economic growth that this state generates, but which, when we need a hand to protect our economy, is missing in action.

I will close with this point: the industrial relations framework that Julia Gillard has lumbered on this nation is bad for the long-term economic future of this nation.

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** You're an unreconstructed WorkChoices advocate.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** You need to remember this, Leader of the Opposition —

**Mr E.S. Ripper:** You are the WorkChoices man in this government. That's what you are. You like WorkChoices.

**Mr T.R. BUSWELL:** I tell you what, Leader of the Opposition: when the port of Fremantle shuts and the presents are not under the Christmas tree, you will be the Christmas Grinch!