Strike activity in Australia at a record low: Calm before the storm?

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Figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) showing the lowest level of strike activity in 85 years are a reflection of the far-reaching crisis of perspective and organisation in the labor movement.

Some 528,000 working days were lost in strike activity in 1997, down 399,700 from the previous year, representing a drop of 43 percent. The number of disputes was down by 18 percent and the number of workers taking part in industrial action fell by 46 percent.

The first thing to say about these figures is that they illuminate the crucial role played by the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the entire union bureaucracy in serving the Howard Liberal government.

Shortly before the federal elections in March 1996, ACTU Secretary Bill Kelty warned of a "war" if the Liberal government came to office and proceeded to attack workers' conditions. But, as the ABS strike figures clearly establish, the only war waged by Kelty and the rest of the trade union leadership is to suppress the working class.

That is, with the coming to power of the Liberals, the union officials have deepened the role they played during the 13 years of Labor Party rule, in which they acted as the chief enforcers of the employers' and the government's attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

One of the most significant events in establishing the relationship between the Liberal government and the union bureaucracy was the August 1996 ACTU-convened protest at Parliament House in Canberra. Called as a protest against the Workplace Relations Bill and the Howard government's first budget, the ACTU intended the demonstration to be a harmless affair. Busloads of workers would merely rally on the front lawns, listen to some empty speeches from Labor Party officials, Democrats and union leaders and then disperse.

But such was the anger provoked by the assault on social conditions of the Howard government, a 5,000-strong section of the crowd broke off from the official protest and proceeded to storm Parliament House, putting it under siege for several hours. Nothing could have terrified the union bureaucrats more. Fearing that under conditions of rising class tensions, even protest stoppages could get out of their control, they called off any further action, wound down the movement and allowed the government's legislation to proceed unopposed.

In fact, the ACTU became directly involved in the final draft of the Workplace Relations Act. ACTU President Jennie George, together with other officials, held negotiations with the then-Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot, who collaborated with Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith in modifying the bill to secure its passage through the Senate.

A year and a half on, the ABS strike figures record the consequences of the ACTU's treacherous role. But they reveal something more as well. The fact that industrial activity has fallen to such historically low levels under conditions of mounting discontent over job cuts, increased hours and worsening pay points to the inherent inadequacy of narrow trade union forms of struggle. These have proven incapable of answering the government-backed offensive of the corporations, which increasingly operate on a global scale.

That the impotence of the unions is not simply a matter of the personal corruption of the union bureaucrats, but rather, their deplorable qualities are themselves expressions of a more fundamental crisis of

the old trade union organisations, is underscored by the fact that the decline in strike activity in Australia is part of an international trend. The US Labor Department, for example, recently released its figures for major work stoppages in the US in 1997, and they likewise showed a record-low level of strike activity.

To the shortsighted observer, it might appear that the decline in strike activity, together with the associated fall in union membership, heralds a decline in the class struggle, or is an expression of the government's strength. That was certainly the conclusion drawn by Reith upon release of the strike figures. Ignoring the old warning about fools rushing in, he declared: "I always said that our law would lower the level of industrial disputes. In fact, per thousand employees it's the lowest numbers since before World War I. On the actual number of disputes, it is the lowest since before World War II."

But in noting that strike levels have fallen to their lowest levels since 1913, it is also worth recalling what took place in the following years. The facade of industrial and class peace was shattered by the struggles that erupted over the next period—conflicts over wartime conscription, a general strike in 1917 and widespread strike struggles in 1919.

Even more significant was that growing numbers of workers, disgusted and frustrated by the betrayals of the Labor Party and union leaders, turned to other forms of organization—first the Industrial Workers of the World, and then the Communist Party in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

History, of course, does not repeat itself. But the lessons of the past do show that the simmering discontent in the working class, which can find no outlet within the framework of the old organisations, will erupt in explosive struggles, posing the necessity for the construction of a new mass political party and the development of a socialist perspective.