

Australian government threatens intervention in power dispute

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Recent pointed comments by Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott regarding an industrial dispute in Victoria's Latrobe Valley indicate that the Australian government is looking for a major confrontation to trigger a new assault on jobs and working conditions. Since its re-election on November 10, the government has put industrial relations at the centre of its third-term agenda.

The dispute involves 65 maintenance workers at Yallourn Energy coal mines. They began a strike on December 2 to oppose the company's attempts to slash its permanent workforce and increase the use of contractors. On December 17, the workers voted to remain on strike for at least another seven days.

On December 8, Abbott announced that the government would intervene regularly in court proceedings on the side of employers and expressed the hope that the new "enforcement approach" would encourage companies to "take a much more robust view" of industrial relations. Singling out the Latrobe Valley dispute for mention Abbott said: "If there are any feasible opportunities to be involved in those sorts of disputes, we will look at them very closely."

Abbott made it clear that had the month-long strike at Melbourne carpet manufacturer Feltex not ended in late November, the government would have intervened on the grounds that the strike "threatened to damage the national economy". He added: "In such cases, the government would argue that bargaining periods should be suspended, meaning the unions would be prevented from continuing industrial action."

Abbott's comment came just days after Yallourn Energy applied to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to end the enterprise bargaining period and terminate negotiations with the unions representing the maintenance workers. The move would make the

continuation of any industrial action illegal. Despite repeated concessions by the unions, Yallourn Energy has provocatively refused to withdraw the application.

The Howard government has been under pressure to launch a new industrial relations offensive from sections of business that are demanding far greater "flexibility" in job-shedding and restructuring working conditions. Abbott and the government are looking for an industrial confrontation as the means for imposing its agenda across the board.

The Victorian Labor government has also threatened to move against the power workers. On December 5, just three days after the power strike began, State Industrial Relations Minister Monica Gould warned that the government was prepared to use essential services laws against the strikers, as it did two years ago when a lockout caused summer electricity blackouts. "We're not going to foreshadow our punches on this... there are a range of options available and we will use them in a very decisive manner," she said.

State Premier Steve Bracks has already demonstrated his willingness to respond to big business demands for improved investment conditions. Last month, he turned on a show of force, dispatching 100 police to bust a picket at Feltex.

Bracks recently met with Japanese consul-general Atsushi Hatakenaka, who criticised the "industrial climate in Victoria". Hatakenaka pointed to a demarcation dispute between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the National Union of Workers that was causing delays in the construction of a \$400 million plant by Japanese food giant Saizeriya.

Bracks sent a letter to AMWU national secretary Doug Cameron demanding that he intervene into the

union's Victorian branch and discipline "rogue elements" in its leadership. Significantly, Bracks has now claimed there are "rogue elements" among the Yallourn strikers.

The present conflict at Yallourn Energy is the continuation of a 1999 enterprise bargaining dispute that was suspended, with the major issues unresolved, when the state government invoked emergency powers.

In September this year, the company won an arbitrated decision in the IRC, allowing it to use forced redundancies to cut its mine production workforce. It threatened not to invest in a new Latrobe Valley mine if its application was rejected. Mine maintenance workers, who were involved in contract negotiations at the time, were excluded from that ruling.

In late November, Yallourn Energy announced that it wished to slash 30 to 35 mine maintenance jobs and that it would ask the IRC to end the enterprise bargaining period, thus outlawing industrial action.

In response, the maintenance workers, members of the AMWU, Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Australian Workers Union (AWU), stopped work on November 30 and voted for rolling stoppages of up to seven days duration, bans on overtime and higher duties to begin on December 3.

A meeting between the state government, company and unions was convened on the eve of the December 5 IRC hearing. The union leadership offered to end all industrial action until March if the Bracks government would appear in the IRC case to oppose the company's bid to end the bargaining period.

Even though the government rejected the offer, ETU state secretary Dean Mighell immediately stressed that if there were any risk of power shortages the union would order workers back to work. Summing up the unions' prostration, Mighell complained: "This is a dispute the union most desperately didn't want to be in. We've offered peace everywhere, but no one wants to pick it up".

At a meeting the next morning, union leaders urged workers to lift industrial action. The workers voted to do so, but only if the company adjourned its IRC case. The management refused to budge and proceeded with its application in the IRC, telling senior deputy president Brian Lacy that the union offer was "unacceptable". A hearing has been set for January 2.

Even though electricity supplies were not under

immediate threat, the company again sought to escalate the dispute. Yallourn Energy manager Lindsay Ward threatened to stand down the remaining non-maintenance employees, claiming that the strike had cut the company's power capacity to less than one quarter.

In response, the Australian Services Union (ASU) covering 15 supervisors, team leaders and technicians in mining operations voted for rolling stoppages and work bans, walking out from the morning of December 6.

Yallourn Energy's provocative actions indicate that, with the federal government's backing, it is determined to escalate the conflict, seeking to inflict a decisive defeat on the maintenance workers and drive through far-reaching cuts to jobs and working conditions across its entire operation.



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