

Australia:

Queensland government calls in Hawke to attack the right to strike

Terry Cook
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On the advice of former Prime Minister Bob Hawke, the Queensland state Labor government is planning tough new industrial laws to further erode the right to strike for the state's 200,000 public sector employees. The legislation, unprecedented in Australia, will shorten to three weeks the period in which government workers can legally take industrial action in disputes over new work agreements.

Premier Peter Beattie called in Hawke, also a former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, to review the state's industrial laws in July following protracted struggles by nurses and public sector health workers. Statewide industrial stoppages by nurses, the first ever in Queensland, have won widespread public support, revealing deep working class hostility to the Beattie government and its pro-business policies.

Beattie and his Industrial Relations Minister Gordon Nuttall have endorsed Hawke's recommendation, stating they would like to see the new laws in place before the end of the year. Government workers and union officials involved in outlawed industrial action could then be prosecuted and face heavy fines and jail terms.

Despite the far-reaching implications, the unions have initiated no campaign to oppose the legislative changes. The public sector unions have not called meetings of their members to discuss the planned laws, but have instead sought discussions with the government. Nuttall described a meeting with the unions as "very positive and constructive".

While the Australian Workers Union (AWU) has boycotted the meetings, state secretary Bill Ludwig, a leading Labor Party powerbroker, made it plain that the AWU action was not a challenge to the government.

Ludwig told reporters last week: "It is pointless for us to be there. We have finished our (enterprise bargaining) negotiations and we won't be revisiting them until 2004".

Ludwig attempted to downplay the threat posed to the industrial rights of public sector workers. "I don't think they (the government) will legislate. They wouldn't be that silly," he insisted. Nuttall, however, curtly dismissed Ludwig's claims, declaring that the government "was not bluffing" and "watch this space".

Hawke's proposals go far beyond those in the current Workplace Relations Act, introduced by the federal Liberal government in 1996. The Act bars workers from taking industrial action except during a bargaining period for a new work agreement. The bargaining period, however, is indefinite and can only be terminated if the employer involved makes an application to the Industrial Relations Court.

Prime Minister John Howard's government, which has been under constant pressure from some corporate circles to beef up its industrial laws, has been thrashing around for ways to push its agenda forward. Earlier this year, federal Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott failed to get legislation through parliament allowing the government to take direct legal action against striking workers.

It is little wonder that Abbott welcomed Hawke's report, saying it had "identified serious problems" of unions "taking prolonged protected industrial action". Abbott said the federal government was looking to deal with the same problem "by giving the federal industrial commission the power to impose a cooling off period".

Abbott said Beattie's move reflected, "a Labor government that had real industrial problems, using a

former Labor prime minister and ACTU president who, in his retirement from politics, is able to take a more balanced view.” The truth is, Hawke’s recommendations do not mark any shift in his outlook. They are completely in character with the anti-working class program he carried out in his previous posts.

When ACTU president, Hawke was infamous for intervening into disputes to shut them down on terms favorable to the employers, earning him the nickname “fireman Bob”. His record won him the support of leading sections of business, which backed him to become prime minister in 1983.

In government, he led a decade-long offensive on the jobs, working conditions and social position of the working class. His Prices and Incomes Accord with the ACTU paved the way for the wholesale restructuring of workplace relations, privatisation, contracting out, multi-skilling and the end of the eight-hour day. Since his retirement, he has used his credentials, as well as his extensive connections with the union bureaucracy, to offer his services as an industrial relations consultant to employers and governments.

Last year, for example, the NSW Labor government paid him \$25,000 to broker an end to a protracted strike over a new workplace agreement and entitlements protection at Maintrain, a private rail repair workshop in Sydney. The complex deal hatched by Hawke in three days of talks with management and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union pushed the strikers back to work without their main demands resolved.

Now the Beattie government has paid Hawke another handsome \$25,000 fee to deepen the attack on workers’ rights. If the new laws are passed in Queensland, and there is every indication they will go through parliament with little or no opposition, they will pave the way for similar or even tougher measures in every other state, as well as federally. Labor governments currently rule in each state and have been involved in sharp conflicts with major sections of workers, including public sector employees. They will be more than happy to follow Beattie’s lead.

With the Howard government’s industrial agenda all but stalled, Labor (and Hawke) are again being called on to play a leading role in creating the conditions for a further assault on the industrial rights and conditions of working people.



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