

Australian Council of Trades Unions Congress 2003: another demoralised affair

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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Congress 2003 began in Melbourne this week. But the triennial gathering of 800 well-heeled union bureaucrats will proceed largely unnoticed by the vast majority of working people. Hundreds of thousands of workers, especially young people, trapped in low paid, casual and part-time jobs, are barely aware that the body even exists.

Union membership has plunged another 69,000 in the last 12 months. Today, unions cover just 23 percent of the total workforce, down from 39.9 percent in 1992 and more than 50 percent in the 1960s. In the private sector membership stands at a historic low of 18 percent.

Attempts by the ACTU to reverse the decline by hiring teams of young high-powered go-getters for recruiting drives, or offering union members access to a range of discounted retail goods and cheap holidays, have been a dismal failure.

Now the bureaucracy has hit on the idea of using the congress itself as a means for boosting membership. Through a series of carefully crafted media releases, it is hoping to create an image of an organisation dedicated to tackling a range of issues that are of genuine concern to millions of workers.

Accordingly, some 30 policies will be up for discussion, including measures against the ongoing casualisation of the workforce, the lengthening of the working day, a campaign for paid maternity leave and strategies to oppose the Howard government's ongoing assault on workers' rights.

This strategy is entirely dependent upon the promotion—by the mass media, the unions themselves and the entire official establishment—of a kind of collective amnesia, aimed at suppressing any critical examination of the past. The reality is that the terrible decline in decent, well-paid jobs, wages, working conditions and living standards over the past 20 years is a direct outcome of the betrayals of the trade unions.

These include, to name just a few, the sellouts of the SEQEB strike in 1985, the Robe River and Dollar Sweets disputes in 1986, the struggle against the deregistration and smashing of the Builders Labourers Federation in 1986, the NSW workers' compensation strike in 1987, the struggle against the Williamstown Naval Dockyard privatisation in 1988, the Cockatoo Island dockyard occupation and the airline pilots dispute in 1989.

Each of these betrayals, all carried out under the ACTU-ALP Accord with the federal Labor government, represented a turning point in the reversal of the social position of the working class as a whole.

The issue of working hours is a case of point. Having been directly responsible for undermining long-established limits over the last decade in the name of providing "flexibility" to employers, the union bureaucrats at Congress 2003 will now consider campaigning for a cap of 48 hours a week.

The first thing that must be said about this is that it amounts to an official declaration by the ACTU of the complete abandonment of any fight to reduce the length of the working day—at the very heart of the struggles of the unions internationally that began more than a century ago, and that ushered in the eight-hour day.

It means that union "campaigns" for the 35-hour week, in the manufacturing and construction industries for example, are nothing but a fraud, under conditions where workers are obliged to work overtime to make ends meet.

Secondly, if the cap *were* imposed it would only legitimise the situation that already exists, where almost a third of the workforce works at least 48 hours a week. ACTU national secretary Greg Combet has already signaled that the peak body is not really serious about it anyway, telling the media, "the important thing is that you get some guidance—not a strict cap".

Figures before the congress from the ACTU's own research show an astronomical increase in working hours over the past 17 years. During this period the employers, with the unions' compliance, removed restrictions on overtime, pushed through 12-hour shifts and introduced weekend and late-night work.

Between 1985 and 2002 the proportion of employees working 40-45 hours rose from 23.4 to 31.3 percent, while those working 45-50 hours increased from 17.8 percent to 26.1. Those working 50 hours or more rose from 10.2 percent to 17.4 percent.

Last year's outcome of the ACTU's "reasonable hours" test case before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) underscores the fact that there will be no genuine struggle to reverse these conditions.

Having spent months presenting a mountain of damning statistics, the ACTU bowed before the AIRC's decision

rejecting extra leave for people forced to work extended hours, and meekly accepted that working hours needed to be determined “industry by industry” and “in accordance with their requirements”.

The ACTU is well aware that workers are forced into working overtime out of economic necessity. A congress document admits that, “for workers to decide to work less hours, base wage rates must be at a level which provide a fair standard of living without a reliance on overtime.”

The unions, however, have done nothing to reverse the decline in wages. Another background paper on the wages of over 1.7 million low-paid workers states: “The new Federal minimum wage of \$448.40 per week or \$23,400 per annum again shows that Award paid workers are being left behind”. It confirms that “the crisis of low pay cannot be solved by the \$17 increase in the minimum wage” that was awarded from the ACTU’s annual “Living Wage Case” this year.

Yet the congress will consider a resolution for the ACTU to campaign for pay increases of just \$17 a week—and for the next three years! Even if these were granted—and, from the past record, this is unlikely—the minimum wage would rise to only \$499.40, maintaining poverty level wages for hundreds of thousands of workers.

On improved leave and holiday provisions, the ACTU has decided to begin negotiations with the Australian Industry Group (AIG) that workers be allowed to “buy” extra leave by sacrificing pay.

As for the myriad other issues, workers will simply be advised to pressure the Labor Party. On the eve of the congress Greg Combet advised unions “to put factional allegiances aside in pursuing change through the ALP, especially at state level, on issues such as collective bargaining, security for casuals, improved minimum wages, work and family rights...”

He was joined by Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron, who declared that the Labor state governments, which rule every Australian state, should be pressed to act as a “buffer” against the Howard government’s “anti-worker legislation”.

All of this is equivalent to hiring a fox to guard the chickens. The state Labor governments have been in the forefront of attacking jobs, working conditions and basic rights. They have culled tens of thousands of state public sector jobs, waged vicious witchhunts against nurses, teachers and other state workers fighting for pay increases and improved working conditions, set the pace in slashing compensation rights for injured workers and privatised state-owned infrastructure such as rail, power and water.

The orgy of cost-cutting and sell-offs was carried out under the framework of the 1993 federal competition policy known as the Hilmer Report, which was designed to create a “favorable climate” for investment by offering reduced costs and other concessions to domestic and overseas corporations. With the backing of their respective union branches, the state

governments began ferociously competing with each other to slash costs, jobs and working conditions to attract investment dollars to their own particular patch. This set in train the continuing downward spiral that has produced today’s conditions.

In recognition of the fact that none of the above proposals will attract members, the congress will also discuss a scheme to create “workers’ councils” in non-union areas, something that will supposedly impart to workers a sense of “collectivity”.

The councils will not arise from any independent action on the part of workers, but will, the ACTU hopes, be legislated into existence under a future Labor government. Based on similar bodies existing in Germany, the councils, if they ever appeared, would be nothing more than corporatist mechanisms to bind even more closely workers to the employers. But the ACTU calculates that the unions could, at some stage, be invited to join them.

If any further confirmation of the ACTU’s relations with the bosses were needed, it was on display on the congress floor. On Tuesday, as 1,500 Qantas baggage handlers walked off the job to protest against the use of casual labor, the airline’s chairwoman Margaret Jackson was addressing congress delegates. She had been invited to speak even as the company was setting about training personnel in Los Angeles to be used as a scab workforce.

While the opening days have witnessed delegates spouting off about the plight of workers, by the end of the week the really important issues will take centre stage. Then the whole tacky and demoralised affair will descend into brawling as each union fights for its own factional interests, including grabbing a greater share of the rapidly dwindling dues base.

Typical is the dispute raging between the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) over coverage in Western Australia’s Pilbara mining region. The majority of the workforce in the Pilbara went over to individual non-union contracts in the 1990s, following a series of union betrayals.

The AWU brokered a deal with Rio Tinto Iron Ore last month that maintains the system of individual work contracts but provides union members with parity in wages and working conditions. But its attempt to get a foot in the Pilbara door cuts directly across a CFMEU recruitment drive being conducted under the auspices of the ACTU.

One can safely predict on the basis of long experience that these are the issues that will spark the Congress 2003 delegates’ real passions.



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