

“It never should have got to this point”

Protesting workers discuss Australia’s new industrial laws

Our correspondents
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Workers attending the 100,000-strong demonstration in Melbourne on June 30 spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the Howard government’s new industrial relations legislation and its impact on their jobs, living standards and basic rights. Some connected the attack on union rights with the government’s assault on refugees, the role of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and union bureaucracies and other political concerns.

Vincent, a Maritime Union of Australia member, said: “When they first discussed changes to the unfair dismissal laws, they said it would only affect companies with a workforce of 20. Now it’s a workforce of 100, so they’re changing things every time you hear.

“Our industry has already been de-regulated and I’m a casualised worker—available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I came into this job after 1998, after the big dispute on the wharves, and was shocked at the casualisation. I was originally a BL [builder’s labourer], then a storeman and then worked in the metal industry.

“All this began under [former ACTU secretary] Kelty, [Labor Prime Minister] Hawke, and co. They stagnated the union movement. Under Labor’s accord with the unions, which was the start of the rot with no right to industrial action, they pulled their heads in. It never should have got to this point.

“Last night I heard [Labor Party leader] Beazley on the ABC talking about tax relief and industrial action. But tax relief is Howard and [Treasurer] Costello’s cause. Beazley is trying to become popular but who wants tax relief when your wages have been completely destroyed, where there are no penalty rates and there’s

complete casualisation of the workforce? With the changes to unfair dismissal, no one will be able to speak out without getting the sack.

“[Former Labor leader] Latham says the Labor Party is dead. That’s true. They have been seduced by big business—and it goes back to Hawke, Keating and Kelty. The rot set in decades ago and so rank-and-file workers are not represented in any form.

“The mass media also helped dictate the terms when they targetted [former union leaders] Gallagher and Halfpenny years ago. If you put up your hand for the union, you were said to be supporting criminals. This is all about capital domination—to enslave the people—and it’s same with the war in Iraq, which is an oil-based war and not about democracy.”

Ajith Wijesuriya, from Consolidated Manufacturing Industry, a car component company in Kensington with 200 employees, said: “The current EBA between my company, CMI Kensington and the employees is due to expire in 2006. There is terrible work security now with the global competition situation. It’s going to be much worse for the future generations with the new laws, so we need to do something about it.”

Olga, a cleaner from Monash Medical Centre, said: “I’m here to protest about what Howard wants, which is going to affect us in many ways. We work weekends and we start early because we need the penalties. The government wants to cut everything. They’re always cutting from the poor, not them.”

Asked about the ALP, she said: “It doesn’t matter who comes in after elections because Labor does the same. Bob Hawke did the same thing when he was in office. We need someone strong to represent us.”

More than 100 employees from the Holeproof textile

factory attended the rally. One explained that although conditions had not worsened very much in the factory, there was greater pressure for increased productivity. “This situation will only get worse with these new laws,” she said.

“The government is wrong to attack us at the workplace and it’s also wrong to attack refugees. They should have the right to come here and have a proper life, just like we did. We were able to come and work here many years ago because there was no work in China. Now these people are being treated like criminals.”

A busload of 48 workers attended the rally from Kew Residential Services (formerly known as Kew Cottages), which cares for severely disabled patients. Leah Gunn said management was cutting staff training, and the “high stress” had become “very difficult”.

“The situation in community services and health is absolutely terrible,” she continued. “The government has just continued to decimate these areas and this will worsen with the current proposal.”

Another employee said: “The ratio of patient to carer is still too high. For instance, two of us have to look after six residents at a time in the section where I work. These are the most difficult patients because they virtually need complete care, as well as being the most difficult in terms of behaviour.

“I am always there, hoping to stop self-injuries but there should be three to four people for six patients. It’s completely impossible. In fact, there are a high number of people constantly on stress or Workcover leave. And to make things worse, our employer has begun to bring in unqualified and not properly trained contract staff,” she said.

Wendy Towers from Flexidrive, a car brake manufacturer employing about 100 workers in Gisbourne, just outside Melbourne, said: “Our union delegate didn’t tell us we had to go out today, that it was up to us. Despite that, more than half the factory came.”

“It seems to me that only the people who agree with the proposal to change the IR [industrial relations] laws are those close to John Howard. As an individual, I can see that these laws will create a whole new situation. The picture that we face in our everyday lives is completely different to what Howard sees,” she said.



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