

Australia: mass protests against industrial relations legislation

Our reporters
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More than 250,000 workers took part in rallies and marches over the last week in cities and towns throughout Australia to protest against the Howard government's plans to radically alter existing industrial relations laws. The "reforms" will allow for summary dismissal, the replacement of collective agreements covering workplaces and industries by individual contracts and the further undermining of pay and conditions.

The size of the rallies was not so much because of the trade union leaders but despite them. It is the first time since Howard came to office in 1996 that the unions have launched a political campaign against the Coalition government's regressive policies. Lacking any other political outlet, many people took the opportunity to express their unease, frustration and anger over the worsening state of affairs.

The largest demonstration took place in Melbourne on Thursday where more than 100,000 people poured in from building sites, car plants, hospitals, the wharves and public sector workplaces. Fleets of buses clogged the city centre as workers arrived from outer industrial centres in Dandenong and Broadmeadows and regional centres such as the Latrobe Valley, Gippsland and Bendigo.

The march itself stretched over four blocks in central Melbourne. Many of the demonstrators were organised in union contingents and marched with union banners, placards and balloons. But dotted in the crowd were workers with their own homemade placards giving voice to their particular concerns and frustrations. Some declared: "Howard reconvenes class conflict," "Not Happy John [Howard], Women lose with IR laws," "Hitler Pinochet Now Howard. Union Rights Human Rights," "Mean and sneaky Libs [Liberals] lay it on again," and "University workers say our workplace rights are not for sale."

Many of those present were unfamiliar with the detailed implications of the legislation. But there was no doubt that they were deeply concerned over the security of their jobs and at the prospect of further inroads into their living standards. The sentiment was something had to be done to

prevent any further deterioration. There were expressions of frustration over already poor conditions and anger over deepening social inequality.

Other workers were acutely aware of the implications of the new laws for their jobs, pay and conditions. In some cases, they had defied direct threats by employers against participating. Australia Post and pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline took out injunctions to stop their workers attending. Highlighting the draconian nature of existing legislation, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission ordered the postal union not to "incite, advise, persuade or encourage" its members to attend the rally. Those that did so have reportedly been threatened with dismissal.

Among a layer, particularly of older workers, there was an entrenched hostility to the past betrayals of the Labor Party and the union leadership. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Vincent, a former building worker, explained the impact of the policies of the Hawke government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in the 1980s. He also pointed to broader concerns, saying: "What is happening is all about capital domination—to enslave the people. The same with the war in Iraq—it is an oil-based war not about democracy." [See: [Protesting workers discuss Australia's new industrial laws](#)]

In Sydney yesterday, 20,000 workers gathered at the town hall and then marched through the centre of the city as part of the national campaign. The demonstration in the city centre would have been significantly larger had the unions not deliberately split the campaign into a series of suburban rallies.

Another 80,000 workers took part in sizeable suburban and regional meetings linked by Sky Channel satellite hook-up. Some 6,000 workers attended a demonstration in the industrial city of Wollongong, south of Sydney. In Albury, 800 joined a protest—the largest since 1997 when workers mobilised against the destruction of clothing and textile jobs. Other rallies took place in Corowa, Wagga Wagga and Deniliquin.

Unlike on previous occasions, the Sky Channel venue at

the Baulkham Hills venue was packed. It was also marked by a general impatience with union officials. One worker stood up and bluntly declared that the union was doing nothing and demanded a strike be called. At a restive meeting in Parramatta, calls for strike action were ignored by union officials.

Substantial rallies also took place in other states. In Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, 20,000 workers marched on Thursday and were joined by a significant contingent of university students concerned over the Howard government's attacks on tertiary education. The protest followed a 24-hour strike on June 27 by thousands of workers in the Pilbara mining region in the north-west of the state.

In Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, an estimated 20,000 attended a demonstration on Thursday at King George Square, the largest union demonstration seen in years. Busloads of workers came from as far away as the Gold and Sunshine Coasts. Over 300 demonstrated in Townsville in the state's far north and other rallies were held in Cairns, Mackay, Rockhampton and Gladstone. Other protests included 5,000 in the South Australian capital Adelaide, 3,000 in the Tasmanian capital of Hobart and 2,000 in Darwin in the Northern Territory.

The gulf between those who attended the rallies and the Labor and union leadership was highlighted by the remarks of Unions NSW secretary John Robertson at the Sydney protest. While workers were looking for a means of combatting the proposed industrial relations legislation, Robertson was seeking to dampen down any fighting spirit. He told those assembled that demonstrations were fun but pointless and that mass strikes were counterproductive.

"I know there will be some of you who want to call for a general strike," Robertson declared. "All I can say to you is that this is a political campaign at present. We need to judge all of our actions by their ability to apply pressure to the Howard Government."

From the outset, the overriding consideration of the union bureaucracy has been to buttress its own position by using the limited campaign as a safety valve to let off the build up of frustration and anger among union members, and at the same time to pressure the Howard government for concessions.

Trade union leaders are concerned that the new legislation will erode their role as the industrial policemen in the working class. If individual contracts between workers and companies replace industry-wide awards and workplace agreements, then the unions will increasingly become irrelevant. Above all, the campaign is to convince employers and the government that the services of the unions are still required to keep a lid on the opposition of workers.

From the outset, the ACTU's campaign has been carefully stage-managed in order to stifle any genuine discussion of the legislation among workers and to keep the protests within definite bounds. Even though, it has been known for months that the Howard government would push through the new laws once it gained control of the parliamentary upper house on July 1, the unions confined their campaign to the last minute.

Robertson's "political campaign" is oriented to persuading right-wing politicians in the Liberal and National parties to cross the floor in the Senate. As long as their privileges can be guaranteed, the unions will be willing to make "trade offs"—that is, to enforce aspects of the legislation that impact directly on the living standards of workers, as they have done on every other occasion over the last two decades.

Despite their rhetorical bluster at the rallies, there is every sign that the unions already regard the new legislation as a *fait accompli*. Union leaders in Melbourne were already speaking of fighting rearguard actions against the application of the laws and waiting until the next election to install a Labor government.

In Melbourne, the union leadership provided a platform for Labor leader Kim Beazley, who offered "rolled gold guarantees" to defend workers' rights. Beazley deliberately appealed to the most backward sentiments, attacking the Howard government from the right and blaming immigrants for the lack of jobs and deteriorating living standards. "They [the government] stand for bringing foreign workers to replace Australians," he declared.

His main pitch, however, was for a partnership between the unions and a new Labor government to guarantee the "national interests". The message is oriented to the corporate elite: that Labor and the unions offer the best option for implementing economic restructuring. Significantly, Beazley did not give a "rolled gold guarantee" that a Labor government would repeal Howard's new legislation.



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