

Australia: lack of perspective dominates opposition to industrial relations legislation

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As many as 50,000 people came to Olympic Park in Sydney on August 7 to take part in a union-organised protest against the industrial relations (IR) legislation being planned by the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard. Events in regional areas of New South Wales were attended by over 20,000.

The turnout reflected the anxiety in the working class over the proposed IR changes. In response to global pressures for competitiveness, the Australian government is seeking to push a radical restructuring of the country's industrial relations system that will force millions of workers into individual contracts with their employers. After more than two decades of eroding living standards, working people fear that their penalty rates for working overtime or weekends, their holidays, long-service leave and a range of other conditions could be stripped away in the process.

Many of those who came on Sunday did so primarily to get information and to find out what campaign the unions intend to wage against the government. The unions had organised the event, however, to deaden and demoralise the mood of resistance that has developed. For three hours, thousands of workers were left to sit around with their families and listen to rock bands, queue with their children to go on various carnival rides or wander along pathways lined with food stalls and union tents.

There was little in the way of speeches and even less in the way of a perspective to oppose the IR legislation. John Robertson, the secretary of Unions NSW, told the crowd to hold Howard "to account at the next election". The union campaign, he said, would consist of staging more events where people could "send a message to the government while they are having fun at the same time".

The newly-appointed Labor state premier of NSW, Morris Iemma, was invited on to the stage to issue a pledge to "fight all the way to the High Court" to prevent the federal government taking control of industrial relations from the states. The entire agenda of Howard, Iemma declared, stemmed from his ideological opposition to trade unions. With no more said, the event was wound down.

The rally confirmed the analysis made in the Socialist Equality Party statement of August 6, "Some plain truths about the fight against Howard's IR laws". The statement warned: "To believe that the union leaders have decided to launch a genuine struggle against the Howard government is to deny the historical record. The attack on wages and working conditions did not start yesterday. It was initiated more than 20 years ago by the Hawke-Keating Labor government."

From 1983 to 1996, the trade unions collaborated intimately with the Labor government to force workers to accept mass layoffs and give up long-established conditions.

The SEP statement noted: "Consider what a genuine struggle against the Howard government would involve. It would rapidly move from the IR legislation as such to encompass a range of issues, including jobs, health and education. It would see a challenge to all the policies of the Howard government, including its participation in the invasion and occupation of

Iraq. Moreover, it would rapidly come into conflict with the Labor Party, which has collaborated with the Howard government at every turn, and raise the need for the construction of a new political leadership of the working class. That is why it is totally opposed by the entire trade union leadership."

The aim of the current campaign is to cement an alliance between the union bureaucracy with the state governments and those sections of the employers who are arguing that the existing IR framework, which enshrines a place for the trade unions, can still be used to deliver ongoing cutbacks in workers' conditions.

In stark contrast to the unions, there is deep sentiment in the working class that something has to be done to push back the assault on living standards. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed people throughout the afternoon about their concerns over the IR laws and their attitudes toward the government, the trade unions and the Labor Party. Workers discussed their views on the broader state of society, the Howard government's attacks on democratic rights and its participation in the Iraq war.

It is clear that the opposition to the proposed changes is bound up with the anger over the extent of social inequality and a growing mood that political change is needed. Several workers told us that Australia was becoming like a "third world country".

Joan Sanders, a single mother of three, was representative. She said: "Honestly, there have been times where we didn't have any bread and I was on a \$50,000 salary. By the time you pay school fees, childcare, transport, dental bills, food and rent—you just can't make ends meet. People are getting pushed over the edge. I have even considered moving to another country.

"If wages go up, prices go up more. Everything is appreciating. We've reached a point where people are either poor or rich. About five percent are wealthy, about 15 percent are about average and rest of us are below average. It is wrong. The whole system is wrong. We get told that if you want something you just have to 'go out and get it'. Well, every time you 'go out to get it' the government has done something that gets in your way."

Lisa Wriley, a primary school teacher, said: "I have worked in child care, and it is survival wages. My mum is a childcare worker and, even if you've got a good employer, they'll still pay you as little as they can get away with. We need a government that protects wages and conditions, not supports the taking of profits at the expense of people's living wages."

People know that far more is involved in the constant demands for cost-cutting and competitiveness than simply Howard's ideology. They are aware that global economic processes are driving it and that workers in different countries are being pitted against one another. Significantly, workers are grappling with the ideas that unified international action is needed and that international solidarity is crucial.

Joan said: "Howard wants the country to compete—but what is happening to us? There should be laws. There are laws that control what

we can do and where we can go and what we can say. Why can't there be laws that protect our rights to proper conditions? The companies are taking their operations to China where they make the poor people work for about \$3 a day. We have to educate people internationally so people don't accept it. Everyone in the world should have the same level of lifestyle.

I think we need an international group that goes around to every country and creates a day where we all say 'No to Poverty' and 'No to War'. I think if we can get something going internationally we can change things."

Charlie Schultz, a hospital worker who previously worked in the building industry, said: "They say they want a competitive workplace. But who are we competing against?—some poor guy in Asia being forced to work for 80 cents an hour. Where is it going to end?"

Lisa commented: "Everybody is trying to see who can get away with the most in terms of low wages and areas like occupational health and safety. It is to try to make more profit. It is workers who suffer. We need to have a much stronger sense that workers in all countries need to have a standard-of-living that is fair."

Workers related how they are at the mercy of the employers. Alicia, an aged care worker, told us: "The company that I work for recently stopped contributing to my superannuation. I can't say anything. I'm 59 and I would be fired. I'm scared. I have to work."

Shila Maack, a teacher who came to the rally with her husband Michael, said: "We are giving too many rights to the employers. My daughter, who is a theatre assistant in a private hospital, was recently asked to re-sign a contract. She wasn't given much room to negotiate her work hours, despite the fact that she has a little child to look after. They were just given these hours of work and conditions and there was no negotiation. The claim that you can negotiate is laughable. For people in lower-paid positions it is 'either take it or leave it'."

Joan explained she was sacked from a job for taking her children to work: "It was school holidays and they had nowhere to go so I just took them with me. I got in trouble for it. I was on a three-month probation. They sacked me. I had no rights. I couldn't fight it. I've just found a new job, but are they going to do the same thing?"

Layers of society who in the past had illusions in capitalism are reacting against the inequality and injustice. Among those at Olympic Park was a CEO who had come, he said, because his belief that everyone got a "fair go" had been shattered by the restructuring over the past 20 years. He spoke of his frustration at not even being able to offer a casual worker a permanent position because it was against "company policy".

The government is reviled for its support for the Iraq war and its recent deployment of more Australian troops to take part in the occupation. With the London bombings fresh in their mind, a number of people said they believed it had placed Australians at risk from terrorism. Joan said: "America had no right to go into Iraq and Howard lied. He had no right to take Australia into the war and now he has put all of us in harms way. I honestly believe that he has made us a target."

Ryan, a young man working with the disabled who had previously been employed in a telemarketing call centre, commented: "Howard's now trying to take away our civil liberties because he says the person next us on the train might have a bomb. I say 'Listen Howard, you're the one who sent us to Iraq. Why should we be threatened because of your policy?'"

Despite the hostility toward the government over both its foreign and domestic policies, the Labor Party is not viewed as an alternative. Alicia said: "All Labor does is make soft and warm noises. The working class doesn't have a party now." Charlie said: "Everything Labor says it seems that sooner or later the Liberals are saying the same thing. And you think, Labor, Liberal, what's the difference?"

Ray, a teacher in the Adult Migrant Education Service, said: I think if

Labor got back into government they would only make some token steps to reverse what Howard is doing."

Workers also had little confidence that the trade unions can or will defend their conditions. Charlie said: "I've come out here blind to find out what is going on. The government says they're going to change things, but change what? Howard is notorious for lying. You don't know where we're headed. But I don't think the unions can do much. I think the unions have been just about knackered."

"Once there were militant unions. These days, you don't hear about them doing anything. I acquired an illness through the hospital and I rang one of the delegates and they just said there's nothing much that they could do about it. They said they would get back to me. That was a year-and-a-half ago."

The discussions underscored that the traditional loyalties to the Labor Party and trade unions have broken down. At the same time, workers do not yet have confidence that an alternative exists. The crisis of perspective was summed up in some ways by the comments of Ryan. He declared: "The government will get the IR laws through no matter what and people are powerless. We can't vote on going to war. We don't get to vote on anything. Our democratic rights are zero. You can't stop capitalism, which is what it's all about. We don't have the numbers."

Such attitudes are the consequence of decades of betrayals and confusion. For much of the twentieth century, the trade unions and the Labor Party claimed that Australian capitalism would gradually evolve along the lines of social equality and provide steadily improving living standards to the working class. The globalisation of production has shattered this nationalist perspective and brought about a transformation in the role of the old labour organisations. They have functioned as the crucial instrument for slashing the wages, conditions and welfare entitlements of working people in order to satisfy the demands of global corporations and wealthy investors for greater profits.

The essential task is establishing the political independence of the working class from the labour bureaucracies. This requires above all a socialist program—that is, the reorganisation of the world economy to use the immense developments in global production and technology to eliminate poverty and inequality—the only one that represents the historical interests of the working class.



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