

Australia: 500,000 workers demonstrate against Howard's industrial legislation

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An estimated 500,000 people rallied in Australia yesterday against the Howard government's industrial relations legislation which is currently being rammed through parliament. The protests were the largest political demonstrations in Australia's history, with the exception of the 2003 marches against the Iraq war.

The attendance reflects intense opposition within the working class to the government's radical revision of Australia's industrial relations (IR) system. The new laws are directed at undermining workers' wages and conditions through the replacement of collective work agreements with individual contracts and the abolition of unfair dismissal laws.

The protests provided another indication not just of the mass opposition to the "WorkChoices" IR laws, but the Howard government's entire agenda. Deep-rooted class divisions and potentially explosive discontent lie just beneath the superficial appearance of social stability and the political dominance of the Howard government.

The largest protest was in Melbourne, where approximately 240,000 workers and young people turned out. Thousands more workers attended rallies in regional Victorian centres. An estimated 100,000 people across New South Wales took part in 227 separate stop-work meetings, including the Sydney demonstration, which was attended by 30,000 workers. Protests were also held in other cities, with 15,000 people demonstrating in Perth, 10,000 in Adelaide, and 15,000 in Brisbane.

The different layers of people attending the rallies was indicative of the breadth of opposition. Industrial workers marched alongside teachers, public servants, nurses, professionals, and white-collar workers. Large numbers of self-employed people, retirees, and university and school students also participated. Many workers were bussed to the protests by the trade unions and marched under union banners, but a large proportion of people attended the demonstrations independently.

This was particularly evident in the Melbourne demonstration, which was far larger than the previous anti-IR reform protest held on June 30, that had been attended by 100,000 people. Yesterday's turnout far exceeded Victorian Trades Hall Council expectations. Twenty-thousand teachers from both government and private schools in Victoria, for

example, went on strike to attend the rally.

Workers turned out in their thousands despite the federal government's \$50 million advertising propaganda campaign, which sought to assure people that wages and conditions would be "protected by law". Large numbers of demonstrators also defied threats from both the government and their employers. Thousands of building workers in Melbourne defied laws preventing attendance at the protest without employer permission, and 80 percent of commercial construction sites were shut down. Construction workers could be fined up to \$22,000, and unions \$110,000. Three maritime workers in Queensland face disciplinary action and may be sacked by their ship towage employer for attending the rally.

The depth of anger toward the government's overall agenda was indicated by many of the homemade banners. "Industrial reform—Howard's weapons of mass destruction", "Howard is a workplace terrorist", "Howard's big con-job", "ACTU must call a 24-hour general strike to stop Howard", and "WorkChoice—weapon of mass deception" were among the placards displayed.

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed many demonstrators who indicated their profound hostility to the government, and concern over the broader implications for democratic rights and mounting social inequality. There was also a general feeling of disgust and disillusionment with the Labor Party over its failure to oppose the government on a series of issues, particularly regarding the "Anti-Terrorism" Bill, which numbers of people regarded as connected to the IR legislation. (See "Australian workers denounce new industrial laws")

None of these sentiments found any expression in the speeches and broadcasts issued at the rallies organised by the trade union bureaucracy. The hundreds of rallies held throughout the country were linked via satellite video hook-up, which broadcast pre-recorded messages from various Labor, Greens and Democrat politicians, academics, and religious leaders. Speeches by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharan Burrow and secretary Greg Combet were also broadcast.

None of the recorded messages or speeches once mentioned the government's terror legislation, the war in Iraq, or any

other issue not directly related to the IR laws. Much of the broadcast, which began with the singing of the national anthem, was imbued with Australian nationalism. The government was repeatedly accused of undermining the “Australian way of life” and the “Aussie fair-go”.

For the ACTU and its state affiliates, the demonstrations represented little more than an attempt to allow workers to let off steam while not committing the unions to anything beyond rallying votes for the Labor Party at the next federal election. The massive turnout came despite, not because of, the bureaucracy’s leadership.

The unions oppose the new IR reforms solely due to their fear that the new system will threaten their lucrative and long-established position as collaborators with company attacks on workers’ wages and conditions. The ACTU’s campaign is essentially oriented to reminding the ruling class of the critical role it played during the Hawke-Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996, when it acted as an internal police agency over the working class. The bureaucracy now hopes to convince big business and the media that it can still be of use in clamping down on workers’ resistance against future right-wing measures.

The official campaign against the IR laws has consciously sought to block any independent action by the working class, and confine all opposition within the safe confines of parliament and the established parties. In the initial stages of the campaign, the bureaucracy hoped to pressure enough politicians to reject the legislation in the senate, and called on workers to appeal to right-wing senators such as Family First’s Steve Fielding and the National Party’s Barnaby Joyce to vote against the government. In Brisbane yesterday, the 15,000 demonstrators were marched to the National Party’s headquarters for this purpose.

The unions have consistently rejected all demands for mass strikes, insisting that they do not want to cause any “community disruption”. They quickly distanced themselves from a protest held by 3,000 truck drivers in Sydney yesterday, who blockaded the M4 motorway. Despite experiencing lengthy traffic delays, many affected motorists reportedly honked their horns in support of the drivers.

While ordinary workers attending the protests across the country were desperately searching for a way to fight the government, the trade unions are already resigned to defeat.

Combet declared in his national address: “After the government rams these laws through parliament we will work right up to the next election to hold them to account for what they have done... Take the issues into your local community. Lobby politicians. Get active in marginal seats. Put at risk the job security of politicians who don’t support workers’ rights.”

The conception that the Labor Party in any way supports “workers’ rights” is ludicrous. Labor fully subscribes to the right-wing economic agenda that underlies the Howard government’s IR reforms, and it was under the previous Labor

government that the move towards individual contracts was introduced. Under the guise of making Australia “internationally competitive” in the global capitalist economy, the Hawke-Keating government launched a series of attacks on the working class, with the direct assistance of the unions. The Howard government’s IR reforms would never have been possible without these preparatory measures implemented by the previous Labor government.

Labor’s record in power has forever ruptured the close allegiance that millions of workers once had with the party. The unions’ response to this development has been to redouble their efforts to prevent the working class from definitively breaking with Labor. To this end, they provided the Labor state premiers with a platform across the country, while federal Labor leader Kim Beazley addressed the Brisbane rally.

Prime Minister John Howard quickly dismissed yesterday’s demonstrations, and insisted that his government would press ahead with the industrial legislation. At the same time, Australia’s largest telecommunications company, Telstra, announced that it was sacking 12,000 workers.

The only way forward in the struggle against the Howard government’s attacks on the working class is to make a definitive break from the unions and the Labor Party—both of which are nothing more than bureaucratic shells. Beazley’s promise to “tear up” the new IR laws if Labor wins government at the next federal election is worthless. A future Labor government will differ from Howard only in that it will not attempt to completely sideline the unions; the right-wing orientation will remain, and workers’ wages and conditions will continue to come under attack.

The globalisation of production has completely shattered the old nation-state based reformist conceptions of the labour bureaucracies. No longer capable of conceding even incremental improvements in workers’ conditions, these organisations now compete with the Liberal Party over who can best deliver the goods for Australia’s corporate elite.

Only through the fight for an independent political perspective that challenges the entire framework of the profit-system can the working class successfully defend past gains, and fight to secure decent working conditions and living standards for all. Such a movement will inevitably be directed not just at the Howard government’s IR laws, but at the entire program of the political establishment, of which the industrial legislation is but one part.



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