

Tens of thousands march against Australian IR laws

Our correspondents
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Tens of thousands of workers rallied in 30 centres across Australia yesterday as part of a “Day of Action” called by the trade unions to protest against the Howard government’s new industrial relations (IR) laws. The large demonstrations in Melbourne, where estimates ranged from 80,000 to 150,000, and Sydney, where at least 40,000 marched, showed the depth of concern and anger produced by the legislation, which has already been used to sack workers, slash wages and rip up conditions.

In Melbourne, sizeable contingents came from manufacturing industry, where about 40,000 jobs have been eliminated in recent months, as well as building sites, car component plants, hospitals and universities. Also represented were Qantas workers, who have been threatened with job losses, and railway maintenance workers, whose numbers have been slashed by successive state governments. Although schools and TAFE colleges are on holidays, many teachers participated. Tertiary students and many ordinary people, including pensioners, joined in.

Homemade placards and banners were more noticeable than on the two previous rallies held last year. These included: “Removing the right to strike is the hallmark of a police state”; a large photo of George Orwell above the words “Welcome to the Farm”; “Vote Howard out—Hang him for War Crimes, High Taxes, Low Wages”; and “Howard’s Laws mean fewer nurses—70 aged care workers sacked in 6 weeks.”

In Sydney, the unions staged the rally in the relatively inaccessible, outer-western suburb of Blacktown, about 40 kilometres west of the CBD. Organisers were clearly surprised by the size of the turnout. The march took an hour to circle around the Blacktown shopping centre, and the front of the march had to be halted to avoid colliding with the tail.

No unions called stoppages, leaving many workers in the dark as to whether to attend or not. Sizeable groups turned out from factories, offices and other workplaces, despite the fact that, in many cases, the unions organised staff to remain on the job. In other instances, the unions bowed to threats of legal action by employers, including Australia Post, and instructed their members not to participate.

Among the largest contingents were state Labor government employees—teachers, nurses and health workers, fire fighters and public servants—who fear the axing of jobs and conditions will soon spread to them. The New South Wales government actually encouraged some workplaces to join the rallies, in order to bolster the efforts of the union leaders to return a federal Labor

government.

Smaller rallies were held in Brisbane (an estimated 6,000), Perth (5,000), Adelaide (4,000), Darwin, Canberra and Launceston, where about 2,000 marched behind the Beaconsfield miners. The Perth rally included groups of maritime, public sector and construction workers, and some university and high school students. Rallies were also held in various regional cities, including Geelong, Albury-Wodonga, Warrnambool, Ballarat, Portland and Hamilton.

No mention was made at any of the demonstrations of the Howard government’s military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands or its escalating involvement in the occupations of Iraq or Afghanistan. On the contrary, the speeches sought to outdo Howard in promoting Australian nationalism, while depicting the IR laws as simply the work of an evil government.

Labor leader Kim Beazley repeated his pledge, unveiled two weeks ago, to “rip up” the laws once Labor took office, and phase out individual Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). What exactly Labor would replace them with, he refused to say.

Instead, he told the Melbourne rally the fight against the IR laws was a battle for “ordinary Australian life... We are going to put in laws based on true Australian values.” Beazley declared: “Thank you for your basic Australian patriotism. Workers are the true Australian patriots, basic Australian family values, basic Australian entitlements.”

His comments underscore the nationalist program of the Labor and union bureaucracy. On the one hand, they have worked hand in glove with employers to make Australian capitalism “globally competitive” against the cheap labour conditions being imposed on workers internationally. On the other, they have demanded draconian measures to bar entry to overseas workers. Their “patriotism” directly ties workers to the interests of Australian-based companies and pits them against workers elsewhere, blocking a common struggle against the source of the onslaught on working conditions—the profit system itself.

The other central message of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Labor leaders who spoke on the platforms was: wait another 18 months and elect a Labor government; and place your faith in the trade unions to defend jobs and conditions. Yet Labor and the unions are the very organisations that have presided over the dismantling of jobs and conditions for the past quarter century.

The last federal Labor government launched the entire program of “restructuring” and “enterprise bargaining,” in partnership with the ACTU under a prices and incomes Accord. Behind all the anti-Howard rhetoric yesterday was an appeal for workers to elect another Labor government, which would proceed in precisely the same manner—implementing all the new requirements of business.

ACTU president Sharan Burrow told the Melbourne rally that the unions would make the IR laws the number-one issue at the next federal election, due in late 2007. “We are going to talk about this ‘til there is no other issue but decency and fairness in workplace rights as the next election issue,” she said. She said the new laws had hurt workers and were designed to help big business. But she insisted that employers would do better by continuing to negotiate workplace agreements with unions. “Even the economists who have got any guts are on your side ... they know without collective bargaining rights that labour productivity is wrecked,” she said.

Unions NSW secretary John Robertson told the Sydney rally that Blacktown had been chosen as the site because the local federal parliamentary seat had been won by the Howard government, and had to be regained for Labor.

Robertson did not explain how or why Prime Minister John Howard’s Liberal Party had been able to take, for the first time in history, the electorate that covers Blacktown, a major working class district. In fact, Labor lost the seat because of mounting disaffection with its record, dating back to the attacks waged by Hawke and Keating, and disgust with Labor’s support for the Howard government’s domestic and foreign agendas.

“The way we win the fight against the IR laws is to change the government—it’s as simple as that,” Robertson told the rally. After the two-kilometre circular march through Blacktown, he declared: “Today is the beginning of a longer march, to the next election, when we will send a message to John Howard—you’re sacked.”

In line with this orientation, the featured speaker at the rally was Jane Lee, a childcare worker who declared that she had voted Liberal at the previous federal election, but would not vote for Howard again because of the IR laws. When the legislation commenced on July 1, she had been sacked. Her employer demanded a new enterprise agreement that would cut staff members’ wages by up to \$130 a week.

In both Sydney and Melbourne, selected workers were invited to address the rallies on the impact of the new IR laws. In Sydney, Paul Weston, a Transport Workers Union delegate for a Wyong Council waste contractor said his company was demanding a new agreement that would cut wages by up to \$340 a week, putting workers on a base rate of just \$12.75 an hour.

In Melbourne, Karen spoke of being sacked after sickness leave of two months, despite 14 years service to the company. Helen related how her workforce was contracted out to Tenix Solutions, where the employees were forced onto individual AWAs. Arthur Leadwige, an Optus technician, reported that 28 workers had been sacked and told they could return as individual contractors if they bought their vehicles.

Another speaker, Caitlin Grover, was employed at Channel 7 until a week ago when 34 caption workers were retrenched and their jobs outsourced to another company, with no overtime

payments for weekends or public holidays, and required to take three weeks unpaid leave every six months.

The main purpose of inviting these workers to speak was to reinforce another theme: the demand for the restoration of the unions’ right of entry into workplaces. This underscored the central preoccupation of the union leaders—preserving their privileged positions as bargaining agents for implementing employer requirements. Again and again, speakers insisted that the unions would “stand with you, all the way” and that without the unions, workers were defenceless.

The truth is that the unions have paved the way for these attacks and continue to collaborate in them. Under Hawke and Keating they helped eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs and abolish longstanding working conditions, ferociously putting down strikes and resistance by key sections of workers in the construction, meat, electricity, shipyard, airline and manufacturing industries. To further break down workers’ solidarity, they enforced Labor’s “enterprise bargaining” in order to replace national and industry-wide awards with agreements struck at individual workplaces or companies.

When the Howard government brought in its Workplace Relations laws in 1996 and 1999, the unions fought to prevent widespread unrest and set about negotiating and enforcing enterprise agreements in accordance with the new requirements.

The mood yesterday, in comparison to previous rallies, was quiet and purposeful, with workers quite willing to discuss the concerns—destruction of wages and conditions, and democratic rights—that had impelled them to attend. There was general scepticism toward Beazley and Labor, and although there was less visible distrust of the unions, those marchers who spoke to the WSWs expressed a more thoughtful approach.

Socialist Equality Party campaign teams distributed WSWs articles and discussed the driving forces underlying the IR legislation, as well as the truth behind Australia’s intervention into East Timor and why it should be opposed (see WSWs interviews Australian workers about IR laws, the Labor party and the unions). Many people took leaflets and expressed considerable interest in the issues being raised.



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