

WSWS interviews Australian workers about IR laws, the Labor party and the unions

Our reporters
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At yesterday's trade union rallies in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, WSWS correspondents spoke to marchers about their reasons for participating. Many expressed distrust for the Labor and union leaders who addressed the rallies (see Tens of thousands march against Australian IR laws) and spoke about the more fundamental issues behind the attacks on working people and the accompanying escalation of military interventions in the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East.

At the Melbourne rally, Shane, employed by a switchboard manufacturer, said: "I don't like these industrial relations laws at all but I don't think this demonstration will change anything. We had hundreds of thousands demonstrate at the last rally but Howard didn't listen. No matter what we do, we don't seem to even scare him.

"There is no democracy. I believe that a true democracy should ask what the people think. It's like a referendum. But no one ever asks us, the working class, what we believe. We're not polled if should go to war, if taxes should increase, when there are job cuts. Take the Iraq war. I don't like that war and over 70 percent of the people didn't want to get involved, but the government still went. That is not real democracy.

"I don't like the two-party system either, because the two parties represent themselves. In the past, the Labor Party was transparent. It stood for the worker. But I also remember the Labor Party of Hawke and Keating—high interest rates, high unemployment, and inflation. In Britain with Thatcher and in America with Reagan they had conservative governments, but the Labor Party happened to be in bed with them.

"Whenever there is an election I go straight for the independents, even though I may not know exactly what they stand for. While I like the fact that [Labor leader Kim] Beazley has said that he'll scrap the IR laws, I don't think he'll do it."

Enrique, a Fine Arts student from RMIT, said: "I have come here today because it is important for the future of workers in Australia. I think it is important to be out there letting your opinion be heard.

"A lot of workers are not in a position to negotiate, the balance of power is so extreme—it's hard when the legislation is not fair.

"Beazley's comments (about scrapping AWAs) are a promising sign for the workers' movement, but I don't believe he will follow it through. His comments are just related to the next election. I think the Labor Party had to make that statement about AWAs because if they had not, it really would have been the end for them. They had to maintain some sort of credibility.

"I guess I am pretty sceptical about Labor's intentions because of their recent history. I haven't got much faith. There is a range of issues I don't agree with—the war in Iraq for one. I oppose Australia's involvement—it is immoral and unjust. It is all about economic resources.

"It's like Australia's interests in South East Asia and the Pacific. Australia is the voice of the West in the Pacific. There is so much hypocrisy—they are meant to be peacekeepers in East Timor. It's ironic because the Australian government was working with Suharto when he was carrying out atrocities against the people. It's the same with Australian companies' involvement in the region—it is always at the cost of the local population.

"The Labor Party hasn't got much of a strong, recent history of fighting for workers and social justice in general—even for refugees. It always seems to come down to pleasing the status quo. Labor works in the interests of business, not labour. I think it comes down to ideology, the intention is profiteering first."

In Sydney, Anne, a hospital worker, said that what the Howard government was doing was "disgusting". "It's taking the working class back a hundred years. My father worked on the waterfront and my grandfather too, and

they were unionists and they fought to get these conditions for the young people. My father would turn over in his grave to see what's going on.

"At the hospital, there's no money to employ people, so everybody's got to work twice as hard. We have to fight for every last penny that we get."

Asked if Labor would be any better, Anne declared: "No, no. Labor and Liberal are tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum, both on the extreme right. While they're in power, you'll never, ever have an equal society.

"Hawke and Keating began all this. I remember all that, and a lot of other people do too. A Labor government would make no difference because they're too weak—they're too much the same. People have to wake up to it and vote for someone else.

"It's good that you are putting up a socialist alternative. People are scared of socialism and communism because they look at countries like China, where people are oppressed and not allowed to do anything. But that's not what socialism is about, it's about equality for everybody. And that's what we should have."

Anne was scathing about the Howard government's intervention in Timor. "I marched for the Timorese people when they were oppressed and Howard claimed to be for them. Now, he's lined up against the Timorese government with all the big companies that want the oil and gas."

Tony, a retired engineering worker, said working conditions had been eroded for a long time. He came to the rally because he was searching for some "first hand ideas" about what was happening. He had "no confidence in Labor anymore."

Asked what program was needed to stop the destruction of workers' conditions, he said: "Decisions are out of the hands of workers. All control seems to be in the hands of the employers and I don't think the workers can do anything."

After some discussion, he said the major problem was that "most people, including me, do not have the knowledge like you to understand what is going on, therefore, they are easily misled."

Tony agreed that there was more to the intervention in East Timor than the media was reporting. He bought a ticket to the WSWS public meeting opposing the Australian military operation in East Timor and the pamphlet *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, by David North.

John, who works for a pharmaceutical company, said he thought the unions were using the rally as a "safety

valve" for workers to let off steam over the IR laws. "It's not going to achieve anything. We have a government that didn't listen to the antiwar protests, the biggest ever, so it's not going to listen now."

A regular reader of the WSWS, he condemned radical groups, such as the Socialist Alliance, for spreading illusions that French workers and students had won a major victory when the Chirac government modified one aspect of its "first contract" laws to sack young workers.

"Socialist Alliance recently wrote: 'We, too, can be like the French.' They meant come out on the streets like the French. What's the point of that?"

John also opposed the Socialist Alliance's promotion of union officials as being at the forefront of opposition to Howard's measures when "the officials have been going around doing deals with the companies in regard to today's rally. At one company, workers were told to apply for annual leave or picnic days so they could attend for a full day. It turns out that members were told the company would be bringing in casuals to make up production."

In Perth, Tim, a young restaurant kitchen hand, said: "I've come to oppose the IR laws. We need to make our voices heard." He said the Howard government had introduced the laws to secure big business support. "I read before coming here a comment by the Australian Business Council that the IR laws are positive. It's part of a global trend."

If Opposition leader Beazley won the election, "he would continue with the IR laws. He will pretend to oppose it, but only make a token effort. He didn't come out straight away to oppose the laws. Now he's jumping on the bandwagon."

Several groups of school students joined the Perth rally. Seven Year 9 students from Rockingham High School in Perth's distant southern outskirts said they came to find out more about the IR laws and what could be done.

One explained: "We have turned up because one day we will be in the workforce and these laws will affect us. The new laws are not fair. We didn't know much about the new legislation, and we haven't been told much about it, but we are very worried."



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