

A question and answer on Australia's trade union rallies

Tony Robson
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The following is an edited letter and reply to an industrial worker and Socialist Equality Party supporter who wrote to WSWs correspondent Tony Robson, asking for advice in the lead-up to tomorrow's June 28 Australian trade union rallies against the Howard government's industrial relations (IR) legislation. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has called its second national "Day of Action" to protest the laws, following similar rallies last year, and to call for support for the return of an Australian Labor Party (ALP) government in the 2007 federal election. The reply refers to racist, anti-Muslim riots at Sydney's Cronulla beach last December.

Dear Tony,

I need some advice. We have had conflicting views presented to us here [about the rally]. One lot of [trade union] officials have told our delegates we are expected to attend work and then go to rally and return to work afterwards. Another lot has told delegates at another workplace something different—that it is an all-day stoppage. It is the same union. To my thinking, the second position is more correct—that is, if anything of real worth is to come out of such events, then a full day would have more effect than two hours.

Basically my problem is, if a meeting of members here votes for the two-hour option, does one shun the majority and go the full day route anyway? I am inclined to think the latter is the appropriate Marxist course under the particularities of the circumstances since my attendance would be more in terms of ideology than just economic. As an SEP supporter, I most certainly do not wish to engage in behaviour which is contrary to its overall approach.

Yours fraternally,

J

Dear J,

In responding to the questions you have raised, I want to

focus on the approach that socialists need take on such issues. Firstly, as Marxists, our fundamental approach is to always fight for the political independence of the working class. This is no different, or equally relevant, when dealing with the trade unions. This cannot be established on the level of tactics but strategy.

In relation to the IR laws, the critical issue is not the duration of the stoppages and protests but the perspective this is to be based upon. The unions are not solely seeking to dissipate the opposition but are actively diverting it along a reactionary tangent. The huge outpouring of opposition in the demonstrations last June/July developed in spite of, and not because of the ACTU and ALP. Having raised only token opposition to the Bill before it was enacted, the ACTU and ALP are now making the main focus of their campaign the demand that the Howard government restrict the number of work visas issued to foreign workers. At every public opportunity the talking heads of the ALP and ACTU have linked the opposition to the IR laws with calls for immigration control.

This is a thoroughly undemocratic and divisive demand. While capital and goods are able to be moved around the globe without hindrance, the unions and ALP demand that workers are denied the same freedom. I am fully aware of the extent to which the IR laws have been used to sack the existing workforce and bring in foreign guest workers on lower rates of pay and conditions. However, the response of the unions is not to organise these super-exploited workers, but prevent them from setting foot on Australian soil! They present foreign workers as the source of the attack on wages and conditions, and the demand for tighter immigration controls is meant to stem the tide of attacks. If this argument is followed to its logical conclusion, why stop at guest workers? What about other immigrants who have settled in the country for longer—are they not also competitors for the dwindling number of available jobs and welfare provisions? The ugly events

last Christmas in Cronulla did not fall from the sky, but are a malignant expression of the social crisis when it is unable to find a progressive outlet. The position of the ACTU and ALP gives credence to the most backward and xenophobic nostrums as it links the defence of pay and conditions to anti-immigrant demands.

To the extent that your union or the ACTU oppose the IR laws, it is from the standpoint that it undermines their privileged position as arbitrators in the class struggle. Through these protests the union bureaucrats are seeking to remind the ruling class that it still needs to call upon their services to stymie and pacify any independent movement of the working class. This is why the leaders of the ACTU also take every opportunity to warn that the IR laws will be counter-productive to the objectives of Australian capitalism. This is why they cannot be entrusted with mounting any genuine opposition to this assault on the working class.

The role of Marxists is to demonstrate how this nationalist perspective is completely out of step with the needs of the working class. It is precisely why the unions have been incapable of defending any of the past gains of the working class over the past two decades and have become appendages of management in driving up productivity and imposing job losses.

If it were merely a case of exposing this or that corrupt official or shop steward, the solution would be much simpler, but it is a whole perspective that has collapsed. The huge demonstrations last year demonstrate that the decline of the unions is not synonymous with the emasculation of the working class as a major social force. However, this widespread anger and opposition requires a new orientation that will not arise spontaneously. The working class needs to understand the relationship between the IR laws and the processes of globalisation, which require the Australian bourgeoisie to establish a new benchmark of exploitation. In this way the need for the working class to adopt an internationalist perspective acquires a more concrete relevance.

I would refer you to the two-part *World Socialist Web Site* article on the social movements in France by Peter Schwartz (June 14 and 15). Referring to the radicals' position on the recent First Job Contract, it states: "None of them even raised the question of a new political orientation, let alone a socialist perspective. None of them advanced a program that went beyond French borders, a world outside does not exist for these people. None of them criticised the trade union and the reformist parties; or any mild criticisms raised referred at most to entirely

subordinate, tactical questions. In short all three organisations defend a narrow-minded, purely trade union and entirely nationalist perspective...

"This national, pro-trade union perspective is reactionary and indicates an utter failure to comprehend current reality. Such a perspective is being put forward in 2006, not in the 1960s and 1970s. In an advanced stage of globalisation, after years of unrelenting welfare cuts throughout Europe, and with the integration of China and India into world production, all three organisations declare in unison 'Workers only have to step up their fight, and the social crisis can be stopped.'"

It would no doubt be permissible to fight for the stoppages against the IR laws to be as unified as possible, against the role of the union to dissipate it. But this question is really of a subordinate nature to the question of perspective.

If you are identified as a supporter of the SEP it is necessary to take up a fight for a clear internationalist perspective against the chauvinism of the unions and open up an important dialogue with workers on this question. There is no quick-fix solution to the problems that confront the working class. One cannot circumvent the development of independent political consciousness. This development will not be overcome through having more militant-sounding slogans than the trade union bureaucracy but through the fight for a new political orientation and organisation.

I hope these points are helpful to you. The SEP will have teams campaigning at the rallies with leaflets and you should consider assisting us in discussing these broader questions with workers.

Regards,
Tony Robson



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