

Australia: Union protests provide no way forward against industrial relations laws

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Tens of thousands of workers throughout Australia will attend rallies on November 30 in opposition to the Howard government's WorkChoices industrial relations laws. Already this regressive legislation, which strips workers of basic rights, is having a pernicious impact on jobs, pay and conditions in workplace after workplace.

However, the rallies have not been called by the Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) to initiate a genuine fight against WorkChoices, but to contain the opposition among working people and harness it behind the election of a Labor government at next year's federal election.

The promise made by ACTU secretary Greg Combet at earlier rallies that the unions would defy the laws with a massive campaign of civil disobedience, even if it meant union officials, including himself, going to jail, has evaporated, like the hot air it was.

The very structure of the November 30 rallies demonstrates that the unions have no intention of organising a movement to oppose the laws and defend those workers already under attack. On the contrary, the proceedings have been deliberately crafted to prevent any democratic debate or discussion, which is the essential means for the working class to determine what to do.

Union officials contemptuously regard their members as nothing more than the backdrop to a stage-managed extravaganza. Those attending at the myriad of venues across country will be subjected to a line up of union bureaucrats, Labor leaders and rock bands beamed by satellite from Melbourne's MCG. The speeches will ram home one central message—the only option for workers is to vote for a Labor government.

The ACTU has deliberately stifled any industrial action by directing workers not to strike, but instead to apply to their employers for official leave to attend the rallies. In other words, workers are being told to accept the very industrial relations framework that the ACTU claims to oppose. Meanwhile, workers are already feeling the brunt of

Howard's laws and have been left isolated.

After the WorkChoices legislation was enacted in March, the unions deliberately limited any action against the laws. ACTU leaders promoted two false illusions: that the legislation would be defeated, firstly, through a legal challenge and, secondly, through the victory of Labor. A fortnight ago, the High Court overruled the case brought by the unions and state governments, so now Labor leader Kim Beazley is being held out as the last hope.

Beazley promised in June that if elected he would “rip up” the WorkChoices legislation. He did not, however, spell out what industrial laws he would put in place. The Labor leader emphatically promised to entrench the position of the unions by defending collective bargaining and enshrining them as official bargaining agencies. But he has said little concrete about ensuring the rights and conditions of workers, while assuring business chiefs that a Labor government will deliver the “flexibility” they need.

Beazley understands only too well that the election of Labor next year depends on the backing of the corporate elite and the media magnates, who are demanding further industrial relations reforms, not a reversal of those already in place. As a result, Beazley has already indicated that Labor will retain some form of individual contracts to enable employers to pressure workers and pit them against each other.

The ACTU Congress in October offered some revealing insights into what Labor and the unions are preparing. In his address, Beazley praised the ACTU for ensuring there was no outbreak of industrial action against the WorkChoices laws that would have alienated business support. Branding Howard and his ministers as “ideological extremists”, Beazley congratulated the ACTU for “resisting the temptation of going to the opposite extreme”.

As part of the election pitch for Labor, ACTU secretary Combet praised Labor not only for its stance on the WorkChoices legislation, but for its opposition to the Iraq war and to the mandatory detention of refugees. “We [Labor] do not imprison men, women and children in remote

islands for years for the crime of seeking a better life,” he declared.

Labor has no principled opposition to the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq, but proposes the withdrawal of some Australian troops for neo-colonial operations closer to home. Beazley wholeheartedly embraces the bogus “war on terror” and the promotion of anti-Muslim racism. Moreover, Combet failed to mention that Labor blazed the trail for Howard by introducing the compulsory locking up of asylum seekers, as well destroying workers’ basic rights.

Labor and the unions refer back proudly to this wretched record. Beazley told the ACTU Congress: “Australia achieved record productivity growth during the 90s, off the back of Labor’s reforms. Reforms that took us from inflexible centralised wage fixing to flexible collective bargaining. Collective bargaining works. It gives employers and employees the right incentives—to work together to find ways to lift productivity and share the gains in profits and pay.”

Between 1983 and 1996, however, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, in league with the ACTU under the Prices and Incomes Accord, presided over the most far-reaching redistribution of wealth to the rich in Australian history. Pay, job security and hard-won conditions, such as penalty rates and the 8-hour day, were systematically eroded in the never-ending race for “international competitiveness”. It was Keating, not Howard, who in 1993 introduced enterprise bargaining and productivity trade-offs in place of the longstanding system of industry-based awards.

At every stage, the resistance of workers to far reaching attacks on rights and conditions was divided, isolated and suppressed by the ACTU as part of its collaboration with the Labor government and big business. The unions and Labor were directly responsible for the long series of defeats—from the SEQEB workers, to the deregistration of the BLF and the use of the military against the pilots’ strike—that opened the door for Howard’s legislation.

The unions are now seeking a return to the Accord. Delivering the annual Hawke lecture in Adelaide this month, Combet called for Labor and the unions “to forge a new democratic consensus spanning economic growth, security, education and climate change”. He condemned the Howard government for moving away from the “consensus which was pivotal to Bob Hawke’s approach”.

Underscoring Labor’s nationalist perspective of pitting workers against their fellow workers worldwide, Combet declared that Australian governments must “promote competitiveness” and praised the state Labor governments for doing so. His comments are an appeal to the corporate elite to once again utilise the services of Labor and the ACTU as the best mechanism for implementing the next

round of market reforms.

The claim that Labor represents an alternative for working people should be rejected with contempt. At the state level, Labor governments have worked hand in hand with Howard, slashing essential services such as public health and education, and providing a raft of tax cuts and benefits for business. There is no doubt that a Beazley government would implement the same relentless pro-market agenda at the federal level, making further inroads into what remains of legal protections for employees.

Labor and the unions are not the means, but obstacles, in fighting for the interests of workers. It is not just a question of removing bad leaders. The globalisation of production has shattered the national reformist program on which these organisations were based, transforming them into agencies working directly in the interests of employers.

Any genuine struggle against the Howard government’s industrial relations legislation is going to begin as a revolt against these defunct organisations. Workers must reject the present phoney ACTU campaign and begin to organise independently of the unions and the Labor Party.

Above all such a struggle has to be guided by an internationalist socialist program that opposes the entire framework of the profit system and aims at the reconstruction of society to provide for the needs of the majority rather than corporate profit. Only by unifying workers, in Australia and internationally, on the basis of such a perspective can the working class begin to challenge the predatory activities of global capital and its local political henchmen.

This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*. We urge all workers and young people to become regular readers of the site and to seriously consider joining and building the SEP as the mass party of the working class.



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