

Australia: national protests against Howard government's industrial laws

Rick Kelly

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About 250,000 unionists and supporters across Australia protested yesterday against the Howard government's WorkChoices industrial laws. Union organisers estimated that 60,000 workers participated in Melbourne, 40,000 in Sydney, and 20,000 in Brisbane. Other rallies were held in more than 300 urban and regional centres across the country.

The demonstrations highlighted the mass opposition to the government's draconian industrial relations regime that took effect last March. The legislation has already eroded wages and conditions, and generated immense insecurity for millions of workers.

The main concern of the trade union leadership, however, has been to channel the hostility to WorkChoices for their own purposes and prevent any broad industrial and political struggle against the Howard government. Yesterday's protests were turned into little more than Labor Party rallies, with workers repeatedly told that the only way to fight Howard's industrial legislation was to vote Labor at the next federal election due next year.

An hour-long satellite feed from the protest held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) was the focal point of the nation-wide rallies. Large screens were erected at every venue to receive the packaged broadcast, in which the official speeches were interspersed with the unions' anti-WorkChoices television advertisements, pre-recorded comments of religious leaders and politicians, and a performance by rock singer Jimmy Barnes.

Everything about the event—which was designed to leave protestors as passive spectators, and backdrops to the official proceedings—demonstrated the unions' contempt for ordinary workers.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Greg Combet gave the keynote speech. “A

new campaign starts today,” he declared. “Your rights at work are not just worth fighting for—they are worth voting for... Above all else each of you can vote for change at the next federal election.” After describing Labor as the “alternative national government”, he said, “the only way to get rid of John Howard's industrial relations laws is to vote against the government”.

Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley delivered the same message: “The only way we're going to get rid of these extreme laws is to throw Howard out, the only way.” He appealed to people who had not previously voted Labor to “sincerely” consider doing so next year. While repeating that Labor is committed to a “modern, fair and flexible” industrial relations system, Beazley has given no guarantees to workers that their rights and conditions will be protected.

The constant refrain that the “only way” to defeat WorkChoices is to vote Labor ignores its record of implementing the agenda of big business at the state and federal levels. Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments launched a sustained attack on the social position of the working class with the assistance of the unions. Since Howard came to office, the Labor Party and the unions have actively collaborated with the Howard government's right-wing agenda.

The unions' appeal to vote Labor next year is, above all, directed at suppressing any independent political movement against the Howard government. The unions and the Labor Party's fear of a mass movement of the working class far outweighs their concerns about the implications of Howard's IR laws. They are attempting to keep a lid on the anger of workers while at the same time using it to boost Labor's electoral chances, and plead for a role for the union bureaucracy in the

industrial relations system. That is why the framework of the protests was thoroughly anti-democratic—it was designed to block any debate or discussion of alternatives.

Labor’s campaign to win the next election is pitched squarely towards big business and the media. Party leader Beazley has provided reassurances that his pledge to “tear up” WorkChoices does not contradict his right-wing pro-market program. Similarly, the unions point to their “Accord” with Labor from 1983 to 1996, when they played the critical role in suppressing and isolating a series of major workers’ strikes and struggles. The unions defended the Labor government’s pro-business reform measures as necessary for the competitiveness of Australian capitalism.

The emphasis placed on Australian nationalism at yesterday’s protests was another expression of the unions’ organic dependence on, and collaboration with, the country’s business elite. The MCG broadcast began with the singing of the Australian national anthem, and there were several stridently chauvinist denunciations of “Australian jobs” being lost overseas. ACTU president Sharan Burrow described WorkChoices as a “threat to Australian values”, while Beazley called the campaign a “fight for good Aussie values at work”.

Yesterday’s protests were much smaller than those held on November 15 last year, when half a million people took to the streets ahead of the Senate vote on the WorkChoices bill.

The government and the Murdoch press claimed vindication. The *Australian* cynically declared the demonstrations “can best be described as an overwhelming vote of confidence” in WorkChoices. Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews said the lower turnout reflected “growing jobs in terms of numbers, record low unemployment, wages continuing to rise, [and] record levels of low disputation in the workforce”.

These claims are absurd. In the eight months since WorkChoices has taken effect, opposition has only intensified. Average wages are already dropping as a result of the laws, with data released last week showing real wages for full time workers in New South Wales falling by \$33 a week in the past 12 months. According to the government’s own figures, almost two-thirds of new individual contracts remove penalty pay rates, half

scrap shift allowances, and one-third cut overtime pay.

Workers at the demonstrations spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their experiences of WorkChoices and their hatred for the Howard government (see “Workers speak out against Australian industrial relations laws”). Many of the handwritten banners provided a sense of the sentiment: “WorkChoices: weapon of mass deception”, “Howard is a war criminal”, “Mr Howard listen to us: we are not slaves”, “Howard breeds insecurity”. But there was no strong positive support of Labor. Rather Labor and union leaders are trading on lingering illusions that the ALP represents a lesser evil as compared to Howard and the coalition.

The primary cause of the reduced turnout at yesterday’s protests was the character of the unions’ campaign. At last year’s rallies, organisers told protestors that the way to stop the pending legislation was to lobby Senators such as the National Party’s Barnaby Joyce, and Steve Fielding of the right-wing Christian fundamentalist party Family First. After this failed, the unions told the working class to place its faith in the legal system. The unions and the state Labor governments appealed to the High Court to strike down the legislation, but the petition was rejected last month. Following the court decision, the unions cynically declared that the only thing left to do was to vote Labor. Unsurprisingly, this conclusion failed to enthuse significant layers of workers and youth.

At the demonstrations in Sydney and Melbourne yesterday, Socialist Equality Party members and WSWS supporters distributed thousands of leaflets, “Australia: Union protests provide no way forward against industrial relations laws”) which advanced an internationalist and socialist alternative to the bankrupt perspective of the unions and the Labor Party. The leaflet stressed that a genuine fight for decent working conditions and wages can be successfully waged only on the basis of a political struggle against the entire framework of the profit system.



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