

Workers speak out against Australian industrial relations laws

Our reporters

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Participants interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* at yesterday's trade union rallies against the Howard government's industrial relations legislation expressed outrage at the laws and saw them as part of a wider assault on the social position and basic rights of all working people. They also voiced considerable scepticism in, and sometimes outright hostility to, the official line advanced at the stage-managed rallies: that workers could only defend themselves by voting Labor at the 2007 federal election.

A broad cross-section of people attended the rallies; not only trade unionists but also students, jobless workers, and self-employed contractors. Some had already experienced severe attacks on their wages and conditions but not all were yet directly affected. In every case, they were concerned about what the onslaught meant for the future of the working class, not just what it meant for them as individuals.

Taman Fisher, who works in component repairs for Qantas maintenance at Bankstown, said hundreds of maintenance jobs had been axed by the airline. "Heavy aircraft maintenance—the 76s and the 747s—has been dispersed from Sydney," she explained. "The workers were told that they had to accept the dispersal of this work offshore or to somewhere else in Australia.

"The union agreed to have the jobs moved to Avalon in Victoria. It was finalised in May this year and 300 people took redundancy with about 1,000 jobs lost in Sydney. There's a lot of uncertainty and there are not enough people to do the work. We've heard that although there are full-time Qantas maintenance workers at Avalon there's lots of part-time contract workers."

Asked about union claims that a Labor government would defend jobs and working conditions, she replied: "How do we know that Beazley won't get elected and then say that there are problems with the economy and he can't afford to do it? The optimist in me says that I hope that a Labor government will change things but the pessimist and the realist says that the vote isn't going to change anything.

"As far as I'm concerned the problem is that the whole tree is rotten to the core and we're the fruit falling on the ground. Cutting off the branches isn't going to change anything. We have to get to the roots. Look at what happened with Hurricane Katrina in America. Bush and other American politicians make promises all the time but when the hurricane hit New Orleans the government did nothing. People were left to try and survive on their own."

Barbara O'Neill, unemployed, and **Liz O'Neill**, a self-employed contractor, attended the Sydney rally together, wearing

matching T-shirts from the 1998 waterfront dispute, when Patrick's, backed by the Howard government, hired thugs and scabs in a bid to sack its entire dockside workforce.

Barbara said: "This rally today is not just about workers' rights; everyone in Australia will feel the fallout. I'm looking for a job and it's really, really hard. If you walk in like me, being assertive, over 50 and having worked in management positions, it's like, 'don't take her, she's used to the old ways'. 'Welfare to work' means you have no choice but to take jobs on any conditions. I'm currently on a benefit and it's certainly unliveable; it puts you on the poverty line, and it forces you into thinking, 'well, anything would be better than this'.

"We don't agree with waiting another 12 months and voting Labor. In the meantime, people are going to get into such a financial bind, and be worried about food on the table. We can't wait! Why should we let them have their way and cut our incomes for a year, while they're treading on us?"

Liz added: "The enterprise bargaining began under Hawke and Keating. People today feel they have no option but to vote Labor again, because it's the lesser of the evils. It's either a conservative right-wing government or a centre-right government.

"The war on Iraq and the 'war on terror' are all about making everyone suspicious or subservient, and it's been happening for many years now. The new police powers and terrorist laws are all about keeping people down and too scared to do anything. It's becoming like a dictatorship."

Rachael, 14, was holding a handwritten banner reading, "Miserable Rat: Help Ordinary Workers Achieve Right Deal (Mr Howard)". **Jessica**, 13, had a banner saying "No living wage for me when I start work". They had both received their parents' permission to miss school (Willoughby Girls' High School) in order to attend the demonstration.

Rachael said: "We're here to support our parents, our teachers, and our futures. I want to spend time with my parents, and for them not to have annual leave, and sick days and stuff, it just seems unfair." Jessica added: "Howard wants to make money. He's a businessman. He doesn't really care about the people, just about business. I think Labor is only as good as the Liberal Party. I'd vote for Labor but it's not like they are a very imposing threat."

Bina is a 20-year-old media arts student at University of Technology Sydney (UTS), who works to support herself while studying. Asked if she thought the rallies would change the

situation she said: “I am not really expecting that Howard will take any notice of this rally. But I came because you have to state you are opposed to what is being done. I am opposed to apathy and I do not want to be part of an apathetic spirit. I feel it is my duty to speak out against unjust laws and things like the war [in Iraq].

“I don’t particularly like the fact that these rallies have been turned into a propaganda machine for Labor and Beazley. It was the ALP that first attacked the conditions of students and also brought in mandatory detention to lock up refugees. So I don’t think that voting Labor is the solution.

“There is a connection between issues like the war and these laws. The whole of the system is tilted toward prioritising the interests of big business above what ordinary people want and need. The majority of people were against the war, but because it suited the needs of a handful of people at the top of society who benefit from closer ties with the US or benefit financially and materially, the government went ahead anyway. It’s the same with the IR laws.”

Another UTS student, **Matt**, 24, who works as market researcher, said: “I was concerned that many of the speeches and slogans at the rally talked only about the conditions of Australian workers, of the problems of Australian families. This leaves out workers in other countries. We should not be talking only about the interests of Australian workers but of all workers. After all workers here have more in common with other workers overseas that they do with the Australian government.

“Speakers on the platform also talked about Australian values. I think this is dangerous territory because it goes in the direction of racism and nationalism and is being used to divide people and attack immigrant workers.”

At the Melbourne rally, **Tony Kenny** is one of the hundreds of teachers kept on short-term contracts by the state Labor government in Victoria. He will soon be unemployed because he teaches at Hillcrest Secondary College in Broadmeadows, one of three secondary schools being forcibly amalgamated into one.

“Microsoft is sponsoring the amalgamation, and when the fancy new school is built, all the students will have Microsoft laptops. It’s all very wonderful, a new \$15 million building and they have an American architect coming to design it at huge cost. But there won’t be enough teachers.

“Teachers now are just slaves. What with professional development, staff meetings, preparation and correction, parent-teacher nights, report writing—somehow we have to find the time to do any teaching. I wrote to the AEU [Australian Education Union] because I was trying to get a retainer wage for casual teachers. I got no answer from them, but I am not going to give up.

“I have been teaching four years. Most of the time I am a casual relief teacher, with occasionally a contract for three or six months. I get no holiday pay, so now I have three months with no work. I have to survive on nothing for six weeks, because I can’t get the dole for six weeks. I’ve got two degrees and a diploma of education, I get on very well with the students, but I’m looking down the barrel of a gun.”

Jean Mason, 80, travelled from Frankston to join her daughters at the rally. “I came today because I have fought for working conditions all my life and I don’t want to see any of them eroded. I am fighting for my grandchildren and daughters. I really fear for their future.

“The conditions we have had were never handed to us—we have fought for everything we have got. We fought like lions. Anyone who is a product of the depression knows this. When I was growing up I saw my parents struggle, humiliated because they were out of work. My dad was a socialist. He had four children and had no work—anyone who went through the depression would have to have a socialist bent.

“I have fought all my life. I marched with the millions against the Iraq war. I stood with the finest human beings that day—young and old all layers of people came to the demonstration. When the war started it was terrible. The most powerful nation in the world—the US against the Iraqi people. My heart just bleeds for all the women and children.

“The Labor Party are totally weak on the war—they did not fight against the war as they should. I don’t think there is anyone much better in the Labor Party than Beazley.”

Andrew Junior, a third-year humanities student, commented: “Everyone seems to be draping themselves in the flag. Beazley follows Howard and then outdoes him. He thinks this is his only way to get support. He presents no real alternative. In trying to get the message out in the media they’re beating it down to a Labor versus Liberal scenario, as if Labor will change the economic culture significantly.

“This denies the global context that Howard’s workplace laws operate in. In every election the party that is elected becomes the best economic manager and follows a corporate model. All they are concerned about is achieving surpluses. They create an environment that is good for business. The more people are deprived of any security and the welfare state, the more they become merely individuals.”



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