

Australia: Unions use anti-privatisation rally as leverage for negotiations with Labor government

Our reporters
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About 1,000 workers and supporters demonstrated on Saturday against the New South Wales Labor government's plan to privatise the state's electricity network. The protest was organised by Unions NSW and its "Stop the Sell Off" protest organisation. The trade unions have postured as opponents of the sell-off in response to overwhelming opposition among ordinary people and members in the power industry who are threatened with major job cuts. However, Saturday's event again demonstrated that they have only placed themselves at the head of the anti-privatisation movement in order to more easily strangle it. Above all else, the union bureaucracy is determined to prevent a genuine industrial and political campaign against the state government of Premier Morris Iemma and the federal Labor government, which has lent its full support to the sell-off proposal.

At the same time, union officials recognise that much is at stake in the privatisation plan, with the inevitable job losses potentially impacting upon their membership and revenue base. They are pleading with the state Labor government to come to the negotiating table and agree to a deal that protects their sectional interests. Unions NSW secretary John Robertson and his colleagues have made clear that their opposition is not directed against privatisation per se. Rather they object to the Iemma government's failure to follow the usual consultation procedures and its attempt to ram through the sell-off without offering sufficient guarantees to the unions and without recognising their position in the industry.

Robertson was the main speaker at Saturday's demonstration, which was held outside the Labor Party's state conference. His comments underlined the fact that the demonstration had been called in order to strengthen the unions' negotiating position with the government, not to initiate a political struggle against it.

After protestors were encouraged to sign a petition requesting Iemma to back down, he declared: "Morris Iemma and [Treasurer] Michael Costa need to understand—that they ignore the will of the people at their peril. We need to make sure that they get the message today. We need to make sure that on Monday they get the message that if they say they won't proceed [with privatisation] they will have the full support of the people of New South Wales. They also need to understand this—if they decide to proceed and ignore the will of the people inside here, if that's the way the vote goes, and ignore the will of the people of New South Wales, they

will pay the ultimate price. People will exercise their democratic right to vote [at the next election due in 2011]."

As it turned out, Iemma and Costa ignored the unions' "message" and did not even wait until Monday to restate that their intention of proceeding with the sell-off. On Sunday afternoon, while the party conference was still in session, Iemma told the media that he was committed to the power privatisation irrespective of party delegates' rejection of the plan by 702 votes to 107 on Saturday evening. He offered to hold further discussions with union officials about his plans, which Robertson immediately welcomed.

Robertson had previously warned demonstrators that the government could ignore the conference vote. If this happened, he said: "We need to make our voices heard today and you will need to make your voices heard on Monday if they decide to proceed. We need to stay strong, we need to build our support and continue to grow that support in the community and make sure these politicians get the message."

The union leadership, however, had made no effort to mobilise their members for the anti-privatisation rally. Many protesters were aligned with the Greens and various protest organisations, and only a few union banners could be seen among the crowd. The relatively small turn-out came despite an earlier decision by the Sydney May Day committee to accept Unions NSW's proposal to change the date of the traditional May Day rally to coincide with the anti-privatisation protest. The May Day "march" consisted of a short route around the Darling Harbour Convention Centre, where the Labor Party conference was being held.

Opinion polls have indicated that 85 percent oppose the sell-off, while Iemma's personal approval rating has plummeted to just 28 percent. The government's power privatisation has acted as a touchstone for mounting discontent among workers, including over decaying social infrastructure in health, education, and transport, as well as rising costs of living, particularly for housing. Many of the handmade banners at the demonstration referred to Labor's privatisation plans for other sectors, particularly Sydney's ferries: "Power, ferries, lotto, and water for sale", "Keep power, Sydney ferries in our hands". Other banners included: "Don't sell the silver, polish it", "Keep the lights on, no electricity privatisation", "Hide the sale as a lease? Can't hide the price increase".

Significantly, Robertson and the protest organisers made no reference to the federal Labor government's role. No mention was made of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's public support for Iemma's plan, nor that of the former Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary and new Labor MP Greg Combet. Treasurer Wayne Swan's interview with that Saturday's edition of the *Australian*—in which he described the privatisation scheme as central to Labor's economic reform agenda—was similarly ignored. There was a concerted effort to focus people's anger on Michael Costa, as if the state treasurer was personally responsible for the state Labor government's right-wing agenda. Costa featured on many of the union-made banners, while protest organisers led anti-Costa chants.

Other speakers at the demonstration, including Robin Banks of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Kate Fairman of the Nature Conservation Foundation, raised various issues related to the privatisation, including the threat of higher prices, more disconnections for low income people, irregular power supply, and unchecked greenhouse gas pollution. Two power workers, Amanda Lane and Les McAllister, spoke of their fears of widespread job losses in the industry. Linda Everingham, from the Penrith area "Your Rights At Work" committee, which campaigned against the former Howard government's WorkChoices industrial relations legislation, noted that the Iemma government was "dead in the water" before the next election and had only been re-elected due to workers' fears over the Liberals' industrial laws.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party distributed several different leaflets at the demonstration, including "Australian unions seek to accommodate on NSW power privatisation", which warned: "Above all, the unions want to prevent any conflict with the federal Labor government, which has unequivocally backed the plan as part of its pro-market economic 'reform' agenda, and keep working people trapped within the framework of the Labor Party... NSW power privatisation is only one instalment of the ferocious attacks on the conditions and rights of working people being prepared at both the state and federal levels. Left in the hands of the unions, every struggle against these attacks will be betrayed and defeated as they have been under every Labor government over the past three decades."

World Socialist Web Site reporters interviewed several workers at the demonstration, as well as Labor Party delegates and observers at the state conference.

Glenn Newcombe has worked at the Wallerawang power station near Lithgow, about 120 kilometres west of Sydney, for 26 years. He participated in the protest rally outside the ALP conference on Saturday and then stood near the front entrance for several hours, wearing his yellow anti-privatisation t-shirt to display his opposition.

He said he was taking a stand, not simply out of concern for his own job and conditions. "They are selling a public asset, and that is of more concern than anything," he said. "To me, before they sell anything from the public, it should come to a referendum. It's the public's, and the public should have a say in it, not just Iemma and Costa, whom the people voted in thinking they weren't going to sell it off. If they can sell it off without the public, then we have

no hope of having a decent society.

"Workers fought for years for the conditions we have got, such as the nine-day fortnight and safety. All that won't be there after today, if they sell the electricity industry. I really don't know why a lot of us voted for Rudd, because he is backing Iemma. When we voted for Iemma, he told us he wasn't going to sell off the industry. I think they all say something, and do the opposite. I don't know who to vote for in the future.

"It's not just Michael Costa. He's just the man they throw in wherever there's going to be trouble—the railways, transport, you name it—to carry things through, and give us the thumb. Labor looks like it's going a bit Liberal. It's all for big business. I don't think they care about us little people, or want to care about us. It's all for profit and money, money, money. It looks like the ALP is a lost cause."

Jimmy Williams works for Sydney Ferries and is a member of the Maritime Union of Australia. "I came along to oppose the selling off of the power system," he said. "It is a utility which we paid for in our taxes, and the government has no right to sell it off to private enterprise. They can't play with it as a toy to fix up their own [financial] bottom line. I work for Sydney Ferries and I think our heads are on the chopping block next. I can't understand the sell-off. I can't understand the Labor Party over the last few years. I don't know what the agenda is..."

"We have to resist it. For starters by coming down to this protest. Anyone can come down to Sydney Ferries and we will explain it to people. Pensioners won't be getting on ferries for \$2.50 under privatisation. The operators will just appeal to the tourists and it won't be a public service anymore. I'm confident that this privatisation of the electricity will be stopped. If not I'll have to think about it and act accordingly."

Anne Faraday, a member of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and the ALP for 30 years, had travelled from Goulburn, some 200 kilometres south of Sydney, to attend the protest rally and the conference. She said she was "furious" about the sell-off plan.

"The ALP should be the party for the working people, but Iemma and Costa appear to be for business. I feel very betrayed. If they go ahead despite a vote against today, they should be sacked—I mean Iemma and Costa. I would support that, very much so." She said she could be disciplined by the Labor Party if she expressed her full views. Nevertheless, she voiced some distrust in Rudd. "I think Rudd supported the sell-off and didn't want it on the agenda until after the federal election last November. Now he's trying to distance himself."



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