

Australia: Labor boosts new agency to attack construction workers

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Deputy Prime Minister and Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard has sent a clear message to business that the Rudd government will take whatever measures are needed to suppress any action by workers over jobs, wages and working conditions.

Gillard last week announced amendments to Labor's already draconian Building and Construction Industry Improvement Bill, aimed at cracking down on industrial action in the construction industry. Her move came in direct response to a concerted campaign by the media and major employers who have become alarmed by signs of growing militancy among workers, especially in the multi-billion dollar gas, oil and mineral sector.

The Bill will replace the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC)—an anti-strike agency created by the former Howard government—with a Fair Work Building Industry Inspectorate armed with all the ABCC's punitive and investigative powers. Having retained the ABCC for more than two years despite intense opposition by building workers, Labor is now boosting these powers.

One amendment will empower Gillard to direct the new inspectorate's priorities. According to Gillard, this will ensure that its resources "are targeted effectively to combat unlawful behaviour in the building industry and ensure that those who contravene the law face tough and decisive action".

Another amendment will allow the inspectorate's director "to initiate or intervene in proceedings for contempt of court where a person does not comply with a court order". Gillard said the purpose is to "send a

signal to those who would break the law in the building industry that there will be repercussions". She went on: "It comes as no surprise that the sort of situations and locations the government has in mind include the recent unlawful industrial action occurring in northern Western Australia". She was referring to a week-long strike by around 2,000 construction workers on Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in the Pilbara region.

Despite threats of massive penalties and imprisonment, the Pluto strikers defied no-strike orders by the government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal, Federal Court injunctions and damages suits by Woodside. They also rejected the repeated urgings of trade unions to return to work.

At the government's behest, the ABCC is already investigating the strike, with a view to mounting prosecutions that could result in fines of up to \$22,000 per striker. But Gillard's target is wider than just the Pluto workers. Her new directive powers are designed to focus the agency's activities primarily on preventing further breakouts of strike action that the unions cannot contain.

Gillard made her announcement on the same day that the media aired a memo by Rio Tinto Iron Ore chief executive Sam Walsh, expressing concern that industrial unrest in the resources sector could spread to the company's "critical iron ore mines".

The memo was the latest salvo in a campaign by Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper demanding that the Rudd government step up its industrial "reform" agenda to back the employers' drive for

increased productivity, cost cutting and flexibility, especially in the resources and mineral sectors.

The campaign began with an editorial at the beginning of the year, demanding that “industrial relations must be at the top of his [Rudd’s] list”. It declared: “The unravelling situation in the Pilbara, where the wealth of our resources sector is being held hostage to resurgent unions empowered by the government’s new laws, suggests that Mr Rudd has a new crisis on his hands.”

Significantly, the editorial added: “Mr Rudd’s Labor predecessors, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, understood national productivity is about intellectual grunt, hard decisions and the courage to exploit political mandates.”

During the 1980s and 1990s the Hawke and Keating governments undertook a far-reaching onslaught on the working class to dismantle longstanding working conditions. Labor’s “reform” agenda included isolating and breaking up the most combative sections of workers.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates played a central role. In 1986, the unions backed the Hawke government’s deregistration of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) and organised scabs to cross BLF picket lines. In 1989 the ACTU isolated the pilots’ strike and supported Labor’s use of the air force for strike breaking.

Former militant strongholds such as the Pilbara were undermined by union sell-outs, resulting in workers leaving the organisations en masse. The ACTU betrayed the key Robe River dispute in 1986, opening the way for a drive by mining employers in the northwest to tear up basic rights and conditions across the region.

The spectre haunting the corporate establishment is not “resurgent” unions, but that further sections of the working class will defy the Rudd government’s anti-strike laws and launch struggles independently of these moribund organisations. The intention of Gillard’s amendments is to concentrate all the repressive powers

at the government’s disposal on inflicting a series of decisive defeats.

In the face of the government’s threats, workers cannot afford any illusions in the unions or their officials. Every union has endorsed the Rudd government’s industrial relations laws and is committed to enforcing them. As in the Hawke-Keating era, there is not a line the unions will not cross in the service of big business.

The struggle of the working class against the corporate establishment can only proceed through a political break with the Labor government and the pro-capitalist trade unions. Independent rank-and-file committees should be formed in every workplace to develop a united defence of wages, conditions and jobs and an international offensive for the socialist perspective of placing the major banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic control.



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