

Australia: Unions launch campaign to secure Rudd's re-election

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Under conditions of growing hostility to the Rudd government's pro-business program and with a federal election due before the end of the year, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is about to launch an advertising campaign to try to revive Labor's political fortunes.

According to media reports, the ACTU executive met yesterday to approve spending several million dollars on "hard negative" television ads that will accuse the Liberal Party opposition led by Tony Abbott of planning to bring back the Howard government's WorkChoices industrial laws.

The ACTU is planning a rerun of its "Your Rights at Work" campaign in the 2007 federal elections, when the unions diverted widespread opposition to the WorkChoices legislation behind the election of a Labor government. The hostility to the laws was a significant factor in the electoral rout that saw Prime Minister John Howard lose his own parliamentary seat.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard and the unions have already begun the drumbeat: if the Liberals win, WorkChoices will be back. On February 16, ACTU president Sharan Burrow pounced on a statement by Abbott that the Liberals would reintroduce WorkChoices if elected. "Of course, they will try to disguise it as something else, but voters know what they are up to," she said.

The entire ACTU campaign, however, is based on a lie: that the Rudd government with the assistance of the unions has established a "fairer" industrial relations system. In fact, Labor's Fair Work legislation, agreed to by all the unions at the 2007 Labor Party national conference, not only preserved all the core elements of WorkChoices. With the unions playing the key role, the laws have been used far more aggressively to suppress the struggles of workers to

defend their basic rights and conditions.

Labor's anti-strike provisions outlaw all industrial action—including strikes, partial stoppages, go-slows, overtime bans and work-to rules—except during limited bargaining periods for enterprise agreements. Workers must also apply for and conduct official secret ballots before striking, a process that can take weeks. Labor's laws add new restrictions. Workers must first prove to the new Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal that they have engaged in "good faith bargaining" and give sufficient notice and details of proposed industrial action to allow employers to make strike-breaking plans.

Workers who infringe these provisions face massive fines, and even imprisonment if they are hauled before the FWA judges or courts for defying orders to return to work. Labor has also established a specialist department within FWA to focus on construction workers, arming it with even greater coercive and punitive powers than those of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC)—the agency established by the Howard government for that purpose.

Gillard has backed a series of attacks on sections of workers who have come into conflict with these laws. Among her first targets last year were striking workers on Melbourne's West Gate Bridge site, whom she accused of behaving like thugs. Gillard called in the ABCC, whose prosecution has now led to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union agreeing to pay a record \$1.325 million in fines. Welcoming that outcome, Gillard said it "supports the government's position that there is a need to focus resources on the culture of unlawfulness existing in the Victorian and West Australian construction industry".

Other workers who have been threatened with massive fines include Victorian paramedics, Qantas baggage handlers and Telstra and Australia Post employees. Most recently,

FWA stepped in, with the collaboration of the unions, to end strikes by construction workers fighting to defend their housing conditions at Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in north-western Australia's Pilbara region. FWA and the Federal Court issued return to work orders that also opened the way for huge damages suits against individual strikers.

The Fair Work laws have been used by increasing numbers of employers to legally impose lockouts on workers, including for simply imposing work bans, holding meetings, or refusing to attend productivity briefings. The lockouts include Sydney's Star City casino, Visy Food Packaging in Melbourne, Campbell's Soups plant at Shepparton, Bundaberg Sugar's mills in Queensland, Peabody Energy's North Goonyella mine in Queensland, Paperlinx-Tas Papers' paper mill in Burnie, Tasmania, health care services company Dorevitch Pathology in Melbourne, BP's Eagle Farm refinery in Brisbane, Heinz's Echuca food processing factory in Victoria, and Xtrata's Tahmoor mine near Sydney.

The Labor government is preparing to escalate this offensive, following demands by the major employers for tougher action against strikes. Last week, Woodside chief executive Don Voelte, called on the government to introduce legislative changes to allow immediate sanctions to be imposed on workers taking unlawful industrial action. These calls reflect concerns in ruling circles of signs of growing militancy among workers, particularly in the mining sector, upon whose profits and exports, particularly to China, the Australian capitalist class is increasingly dependent.

In response, Gillard has vowed to continue the government's "tough line". She told the National Press Club on February 24: "Unlawful industrial action is wrong. People should expect to be punished; they should expect to feel the full force of the law; no apologies, no excuses, full stop." Gillard boasted that Labor's laws, combined with the global financial crisis, had produced the lowest wages growth since records were kept. She referred to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures showing that wages grew by an average of just 2.9 percent in 2009.

None of these attacks on workers would have been possible without the unions. In every instance they have isolated the workers involved, urged strikers to return to work and imposed settlements that have delivered the basic demands of the employers. Far from making any challenge to the anti-strike laws, they have straitjacketed workers within them. In the case of the Pluto workers, the ACTU

specifically issued a statement branding their strike as illegal and calling on them to go back to work immediately.

This is precisely the policing role that the unions sought under Labor's laws. Their differences with WorkChoices were never about the destruction of jobs and lowering of workers' conditions; they were concerned about being sidelined by individual and non-union agreements. Apart from being more draconian, the only significant difference between WorkChoices and the Fair Work Australia legislation is that Labor's version grants the unions a greater entrenched legal status to deliver employer requirements via collective enterprise agreements.

It is this role that the unions are seeking to preserve by reviving the anti-WorkChoices agitation. No doubt they will receive the support of all the ex-lefts and radicals who joined the "Your Rights at Work" campaign in 2007. Together, they all bear political responsibility for the offensive being waged by the Labor government and the corporate boardrooms against workers and their fundamental rights, including the right to strike itself.

It is no accident that the ACTU has launched a negative scare campaign. There is nothing positive in the Rudd government's record to defend. On every issue from industrial laws to public education and now health care, Labor has continued and deepened the corporate agenda implemented under Howard. The efforts of the ACTU to once again drum up support for Labor by painting it as the "lesser evil" should be rejected with contempt.

The necessary political conclusions must be drawn. Workers can only defend their living standards and basic rights by breaking from the two-party system and by mobilising independently on the basis on a socialist perspective. That will necessarily involve a rebellion against the entire system of industrial laws, which have been put in place to suppress all forms of independent action, and against the unions that police it.



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