

Australia: Workers rally against Labor government's building industry watchdog

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Construction workers around Australia yesterday marked International Workers Memorial Day by rallying against the Labor government's anti-democratic construction industry "watchdog", the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

Established by the previous Howard Liberal government, the ABCC has been retained by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in the face of bitter opposition from sections of workers. The body's draconian powers to crack down on industrial action, and interrogate and fine building workers, are to be modified and strengthened later this year when it is incorporated as a specialist division of Labor's Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal. According to figures released by the unions, since the establishment of the ABCC in late 2005, workplace safety has deteriorated, with deaths in the construction industry rising from 3.14 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2004, to 4.27 in 2008, down from a peak of 5.6 in 2006.

Small meetings or rallies were staged in Perth, Adelaide, and Hobart under the slogan, "Mourn for the Dead, Fight for the Living". In Sydney, hundreds of people helped place flowers at Reflection Park in Darling Harbour in remembrance of workers killed through accidents or illness. Larger demonstrations were held in Brisbane, where about 1,200 workers marched to Rudd's office, and in Melbourne, where about 5,000 marched to the office of Julia Gillard, the deputy prime minister and minister for workplace relations.

In Melbourne, building workers, electricians, plumbers and other workers attended from sites across the city. Some travelled to the rally from the regional city of Geelong and from the port of Hastings, each about 75 kilometres away, as well as from the Latrobe Valley, the centre of Victoria's power-generating industry, 150 kilometres from the state capital.

The rallies were marked by a glaring contradiction. While called to demand the ABCC's abolition and oppose health and safety dangers confronting workers, the protests were led by the unions which are directly policing the Rudd government's industrial relations regime. The unions actively campaigned for

Rudd's election in 2007, having earlier unanimously endorsed Labor's "Forward with Fairness" platform which retained the anti-strike provisions of Howard's Work Choices laws. The unions have been instrumental in pre-empting the emergence of any political challenge to the Rudd government and in sabotaging any "unlawful" industrial action taken by workers in defence of their wages and conditions.

As for the ABCC and the unions' purported opposition to this body, earlier this year the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) agreed to hand over \$1.3 million in their members' money to the body for breaches of industrial laws during a dispute last year at Melbourne's West Gate Bridge construction project. The payment underscored the unions' complicity with the ABCC's attacks on workers' basic rights.

Labor MPs were provided with a platform at several of yesterday's events. In Sydney, for example, New South Wales Finance Minister Michael Daley declared: "Every death, in every workplace, is a boundless tragedy. We want to see our loved ones go to work every day and just come home to us in one piece."

This cynical posturing belies the reality of Labor's record—in NSW, in other states where it holds office, and federally. The Rudd government and its state counterparts have drawn up a national occupational health and safety (OHS) regime, as part of their efforts to deliver a "seamless national economy" for big business. The reform involves a drive to equalise the states' OHS laws at the expense of workers' safety by eliminating various provisions in different states regarded by business as too generous (see: "Workers protest against Labor government assault on safety laws"). More workplace deaths and injuries will inevitably ensue.

In Melbourne, speeches began at the assembly point at Trades Hall. Speakers included newly installed Australian Council of Trade Unions president Ged Kearney, CFMEU national secretary Dave Noonan and Electrical Trades Union (ETU)

state secretary Dean Mighell. Kearney said she was “shocked” at the rate of industrial deaths under the ABCC’s watch, and told the rally about her past experiences treating injured workers when she was an emergency nurse. She was silent, however, about the ACTU’s current campaign to re-elect the Rudd government, reviving the 2007 “Your Rights at Work” pitch. Noonan said workers should pressure Labor to deliver safety for workers.

Mighell issued some demagogic criticisms of the Labor government, absurdly denouncing Julia Gillard as a “betrayor of the working class”. He noted that many of the construction workers attending the rally were doing so illegally and could face ABCC sanction. “This is under a Labor government,” he said. “This is not Howard’s laws anymore—they’re Rudd’s laws.”

The ETU state secretary speaks for a section of the union bureaucracy conscious of the growing hostility among workers to the Rudd government’s right-wing policies. He has attempted to promote the Greens as an alternative, yesterday praising their moving of a parliamentary motion last year to abolish the ABCC, and calling for a Green vote at the next election. He said nothing, however, about the role of the Greens in Tasmania—under the guidance of federal leader Bob Brown, the party has formed a coalition government with Labor after unsuccessfully trying to cut a deal with the Liberals.

Following the Trades Hall speeches and the observation of a minute’s silence for those killed due to workplace injuries, workers marched through the city streets to Gillard’s office in an atmosphere that was quiet, even sombre.

The final speaker at the demonstration, CFMEU state secretary Bill Oliver, promoted the ACTU campaign for Rudd’s re-election. He declared: “This is not a political rally. There are a lot of good Labor people in parliament. From Victoria there are a lot of good ones, people who believe the ABCC should go.”

The remarks underscored the political bankruptcy of the trade unions, which have no basic differences with Labor’s pro-business program. Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party advanced the need for workers to defend their jobs, wages, and conditions by breaking with the unions and the Labor Party, fighting instead to build a new independent political party of the working class on a socialist and internationalist perspective. WSWs leaflets—“Construction unions to pay record \$1.3 million fine” and “Labor boosts new agency to attack construction workers”—were distributed and met with a serious response.

The mounting anger of construction workers toward the Rudd

government was expressed in the interview given by one of the workers who had faced nine criminal charges during the West Gate Bridge dispute. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he had been found not guilty. “If they can get rid of us, construction workers, then workers in all industries will suffer. What we win—say the 36-hour week—filters through to workers throughout industry... Look at what is happening. ‘Balaclava wearing thugs’! I got arrested, and I wasn’t wearing a balaclava!”

This was a reference to Gillard’s slanderous statement, echoed by other Labor ministers, that workers defending their jobs on the West Gate project had worn balaclavas, when in fact it was the non-union scabs brought in by the construction company John Holland who had worn them. The West Gate worker was hostile to former ACTU secretary Greg Combet for his role. “He once made speeches that the ABCC had to go,” he told the WSWs. “But now he says workers are ‘balaclava wearing thugs’ and that is why the ABCC needs to stay. He’s just another Bob Hawke—a turncoat—and I can’t believe I marched behind him at the [1998 maritime] MUA dispute.”

Another worker who spoke with the WSWs, Paul, has worked as a construction rigger in the Latrobe Valley power industry for 29 years. He said he attended the rally in order to ensure a high standard of safety in all industries and noted that OHS “still hasn’t improved so that you could send your son in there with confidence that he isn’t going to get hurt at work”.

He was worried about the situation “where a lot of the workforce is casualised so the employers can just lay them off and bring them back when they want”. He said the privatisation of electricity “ruined the Valley... Employment’s dropped. I couldn’t say exactly, but in the power industry it’s dropped 40 percent and that’s had a flow-on effect to the community. That’s ruined it up there, in the power industry, ruined it.”



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