

Protests continue against South Australian job cuts

Alan Leigh
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In the latest in a series of trade union-sponsored rallies, about 1,000 public sector workers protested outside the South Australian parliament on Thursday, denouncing the state Labor government's plans to axe nearly 4,000 jobs, slash public services, abolish job security and scrap long service entitlements and holiday leave loadings. A convoy of fire trucks blocked a major Adelaide city street and forced the suspension of city tram services.

The demonstration, following a similar one a week earlier, was only a pale reflection of the widely-felt shock and outrage over the savage cuts, which will hit schools, hospitals, transport, environmental regulation and other basic services, and impose regressive fees and charges. Public servants have denounced the unilateral tearing up of basic working conditions and legal rights. Teachers', doctors' and farmers' organisations have warned that small schools could be forced to close, frontline clinical services in public hospitals will be impacted, and farmers will be unable to afford the proposed "user pays" charges for agricultural services.

An anonymous worker questioned the unions' campaign by posting the following comment on the Public Service Association (PSA) website: "The PSA is for the Labor Government or for the workers? It can't be both. What use is a protest during lunch break? We should be causing more disruption to government than that."

The limited protest campaign is oriented toward exerting pressure on the government to negotiate the cuts with the union bureaucrats and head off any independent political fight by the working class against the Labor government. The main PSA slogans and placards on the demonstrations were "Negotiate don't legislate" and "Bargain don't bludgeon".

At Thursday's rally, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Ged Kearney asked the government to come to the negotiating table. "We will talk because we know how to bargain fairly," she said. She later said the ACTU hoped that the government would "come to its senses" to avoid the need for further trade union action.

The unions are also seeking to head off hostility toward the Labor government as a whole by depicting Premier Mike Rann and Treasurer Kevin Foley as rotten individuals, out of line with Labor policy. According to SA Unions secretary Janet Giles, further actions could include a campaign to remove an "arrogant, out of touch and untrustworthy" premier and treasurer before the next state election in 2014. "Unions never thought they would be marshalling their efforts against a Labor government, but really, this is about targeting the bad apples who are putting the Labor barrel at risk," Giles said. As a potential replacement leader, the unions are promoting Education Minister Jay Weatherill, who failed in a bid to take Foley's post six months ago.

The record shows, however, that the entire government, acting in close concert with the unions, has been imposing austerity measures, and preparing the latest cuts, since the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008. In 2009, the government seriously eroded Work Cover insurance entitlements and eliminated 1,600 public sector jobs. The unions backed the re-election of the Rann government in March despite its establishment of a Sustainable Budget Committee last year to further slash jobs and conditions. During the election campaign, in a statement posted on the PSA website, the union's chief industrial officer Peter Christopher said: "The PSA is pleased that Mr Rann has promised to listen, and to

change.

The unions have also mooted a legal challenge to the measures, arguing that they are contrary to the collective bargaining framework enshrined in the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia legislation. The ACTU's Kearney told Thursday's rally the union movement expected "vicious attacks" on workers rights' by employers and the Liberal-National Party Coalition, but was shocked by "an extraordinary attack from Labor leaders on good faith bargaining principles".

In reality, the Rann government's offensive is backed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the architect of the federal workplace laws, and is regarded by both the Gillard government and the corporate and media establishment as a test case for similar measures in other states. Federal Workplace Relations Minister Chris Evans refused to enter the dispute, saying: "These are matters for the consideration of the South Australian government."

An editorial in the *Australian* last week hailed Rann for being "brave enough" to challenge the supposedly cosy consensus between Gillard and federal opposition leader Tony Abbott to rule out changes to the federal industrial relations system to boost productivity. The newspaper praised Rann for putting "the health of the South Australian economy ahead of the need to preserve the ideological purity of federal Labor's union-appeasing policy".

When the cuts were announced in last month's annual budget, Treasurer Foley declared that they were essential to offset an estimated \$1.4 billion of revenue lost due to the global financial crisis. For all the claims that Australia has escaped the economic turmoil, the budget is a warning of what is to come across the country. Foley referred to a "global backdrop of uncertainty and decline". In return for Labor's austerity measures, the credit ratings agencies, Standard & Poor's and Moody's, agreed to maintain the state's AAA rating, but Standard & Poor's warned against any "lack of political will or ability to deliver on the proposed savings".

Rann has responded contemptuously to the union protests, telling parliament on Thursday that Labor had won re-election in March "because the people of this state want governments that make tough decisions". In reality, none of the cuts was mentioned during the

March election campaign, when Rann's government just survived, with a slender parliamentary majority, after eight years in office carrying out a pro-business program.

A number of organisations have warned of the devastating impact of the government's decisions. Ross Womersley, executive director of the South Australian Council of Social Services, said increased fares would hit people on low incomes. "They would be one of the highest users of public transport, so they will be one of the groups of people who will pay those additional costs and in fact won't have an option about not being able to use public transport to get their daily needs addressed," he said.

According to South Australian Small Schools Association president Barry Niven, up to 100 schools are at risk of closure due to cuts to small schools grants. Andrew Lavender from the Australian Medical Association said job cuts in the area of health administration would affect frontline clinical services, because doctors and nurses would be forced to provide the administrative support.

Far from leading any fight against the Labor government, the unions are seeking to prop it up by preventing the emergence of an independent political struggle against the destruction of jobs, services and conditions.

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