

Marchers discuss political issues raised by Sydney protest

Our reporters
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The WSWS spoke to public sector workers who rallied in Sydney yesterday to fight the New South Wales (NSW) government's budget cuts and industrial legislation.

Cherie, a cleaner at Sutherland Hospital, said “all these government policies are pulling everything down” that workers had fought for over sixty years. “It’s happening all around the world, when you look at all the trouble in Europe and Italy and France,” she said.

The cleaner described the impact of years of budget cuts on the public hospital system. “In health, you go into a hospital you could wait five or six hours before a doctor can see you, or you even get a bed. It is getting to the point where people are going to die waiting in hospitals, like the little boy with appendicitis who died at Liverpool Hospital recently.”

Cherie said she did not understand how the financial markets worked, or why governments, both Labor and Liberal, accepted their dictates. “I know things are getting a lot harder for families and the next generation. I have grandchildren, and I would like to see them grow up to get decent education and jobs. If we keep going backwards that won’t happen.”

Cherie’s brother had worked in the Wollongong steelworks, where BlueScope Steel had just announced 1,100 retrenchments. “The BlueScope sackings are terrible. Those workers were given just a few months’ notice. Where are they going to find work in Wollongong? Where are the training courses to get new jobs?”

Warwick, a Sydney Ferries worker, denounced the privatisation of the ferry service, but pointed out that both Labor and Liberal governments pursued the same agenda. “If we lose staff, the safety of Sydney ferries will be jeopardised seriously. Down at the waterfront we have heard from the unions that there are wage cuts and cuts to

conditions planned. These days it doesn’t matter what side of politics we’re up against, we’ll still have to use the same united front of workers. You can’t rely on what faction of government is in power to help workers—Labor or Liberal. They are the same.”

Walter, 57, who works for the Road Transport Authority, expressed concern over the conditions workers face in other countries. “How does it happen that in Thailand or Malaysia, or wherever else the designer brand products are made, they pay workers minimal [wages] then bring the stuff here and sell it for massive profits?

“These people are being paid a pittance and if they stand up and argue about it they get smashed! Well it’s no different here—every time you go on a protest they threaten to sue you or fine you. Look at the Teachers Federation. The government uses exactly the same umpire [the Industrial Relations Commission] it wants to get rid of to take the Teachers Federation to court and fine them \$20,000 for taking the day off.”

Walter was disgusted that workers were being made to pay for the bailouts of the banks and financial institutions in 2008-09. “With the amount of money this country is bringing in with this mining boom we shouldn’t have to have these cuts. We should have the best hospitals and schools in the world! We’ve seen hundreds and hundreds of Americans lose their jobs over this, but no American or European bankers have gone to jail, no government ministers, no one from the big end of town. They brought in a series of measures—did their wages or conditions get cut? No! But everyone else’s did.”

Jasmine, who has recently become a high school geography, history and commerce teacher, objected to the federal Labor government’s standardised NAPLAN testing regime, as well as the O’Farrell government’s cuts.

“The cuts make becoming a teacher a profession you don’t want to go into. But it is the same with the Labor government’s NAPLAN testing. NAPLAN is there to regulate how much money will go into education. It will not help us teach better or help young people learn better. It turns children into a commodity. We are following in the steps of the US in terms of the similar regulation and cutting of spending on education. It is scary. I would like to think Labor would be different but it’s difficult to stand here today and think there would be any difference if Labor were in government.”

Noah, a university education student, said: “I’m here today because I believe in teachers’ rights. The teachers I work with have told me what’s involved in the government’s attacks. I’ve come to Australia from Canada because I want to work in public schools. I’m doing an internship, working in schools without pay. The public system should be maintained, it shouldn’t be privatised.”

Noah was surprised that Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s NAPLAN and MySchool scheme was calculated to push parents to transfer their children to private schools. “I wouldn’t have thought the Labor Party would be doing that; it sounds more like the Liberals. That’s very disappointing.”

Nicole, a school support worker, said: “We are upset about the 2.5 percent pay cap because school staff are already on low incomes. They work six hours a day and can’t do any overtime.” She added that many school staff spent years in temporary positions, unable to get permanency. The public sector job cuts were “disgusting ... as a system the services are just not going to be there ... We’ll all be disadvantaged, whether we work for the public sector or not.”

Nicole had been a Labor supporter but believed that “they aren’t what they used to be. The only way to stay strong is through the unions. Labor has lost sight of what they were initially there for. I think it’s a problem with all politicians; the point is to keep fighting regardless of who’s in government.”

Lennie, a teacher, said she was at the rally because “as a teacher my foremost concern is ensuring education for all.” She said wage cutting would send the best teachers into private schools. “We’re basically setting up two classes of schools in our society where we’re going to have to pay for education.”

Asked whether this would continue to happen under a Labor government, Lennie said: “I don’t think that at this

point it would change anything. I think we were coming down this path anyway prior to this. We can see this with our federal government as well—there really is no difference between the two. We’re being driven in the same direction.”

Andrew, a Technical and Further Education teacher, said: “Our working hours have been increased from 30 to 35 hours a week, which means that we don’t have time to do research, or to prepare. Our time is consumed by teaching, and administrative work.

“The system is all about user-pays—we pay a lot of money in taxes, but we don’t get it back from the government. The executives who caused the economic crisis are not being punished. We are the ones that suffer, and pay for the crisis that they caused. Everything is about money making—it’s not about people, or their future. It’s all about shareholders benefits.

“I’ve lost faith in both parties—I think they’re the same. Labor is supposed to be a representative of the workers, but they don’t seem to be doing that...That’s why they lost the election. But the O’Farrell government is even worse—all they are concerned about is cutting public sector jobs.

Jay, a university student, said: “I’m here at the protest today because I absolutely agree that workers have to stand in solidarity with each other to prevent cuts in living conditions. I’ve heard that this is the largest protest in two decades but I’d also say that the political climate seems to be one where we are trying to get rid of the Liberal Party but we’re not as staunchly critical of the Labor Party as we should be.

“There’s no real difference between Labor and Liberal. They’re both in favour of austerity and we should be challenging them both. It’s relatively easy for the unions to call a rally against the Liberals because they are so closely linked to Labor. If Labor was in government I doubt they would call a rally to oppose them.”



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