

# Australia: Thousands rally against NSW budget cuts

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Close to 40,000 public sector workers, including teachers, ferry and transport workers, firefighters, and health and community workers, rallied in Sydney yesterday to oppose the New South Wales (NSW) government's budget cuts and industrial relations legislation. The march, one of the largest seen in the city in the past 20 years, took more than an hour to pass in front of parliament house.

Two days earlier, the Liberal-National Party government had announced an \$8 billion cost-cutting plan to slash at least 5,000 jobs from the public sector, keep pay rises capped at 2.5 percent a year—a real wage cut—and privatise Port Botany and other basic services.

The size of yesterday's turnout, which Unions NSW organisers admitted had surprised them, reflected an emerging determination among wide layers of working people to resist the assault, which is part of a global offensive against the working class. Many contingents, especially among the teachers, had significant numbers of younger workers, for whom this was their first experience of a large protest.

Thousands of teachers defied a state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) order to call off their 24-hour strike that shut down more than 600 schools. Sydney Ferries workers also walked off for four hours, halting harbour ferry services, despite government threats of fines for "illegal" industrial action. About 500 firefighters left their stations to march to the rally in their uniforms.

Delegations of teachers and other public servants came from across the state, including from the Illawarra (Wollongong) region, which also faces devastation from the 1,400 job cuts announced last month by BlueScope Steel. Throughout regional NSW, another 10,000

participated, with rallies in Dubbo, Coffs Harbour and Albury each attracting an estimated 1,000 demonstrators.



While most protesters in Sydney assembled and marched under official union banners, some handwritten placards gave voice to deeply-felt hostility to the retrograde conditions that the trade unions themselves, and successive state and federal Labor governments, have already enforced over recent decades. "I'm not overpaid on \$18.78 an hour," one read. "My mum works two jobs," said another. Others included: "Fairness and respect for the rank and file," "politicians lie for a living" and "public servants are not the enemy." (See: "Marchers discuss political issues raised by Sydney protest")

By contrast, the perspective advanced from the platform at the rally in the Domain was to appeal to Premier Barry O'Farrell to work with the unions to achieve cost-cutting via "collective bargaining" and "independent arbitration" in the IRC—the very same industrial court that had just outlawed the teachers' strike.

The opening speaker said the message to O'Farrell was: "If you want to take away our wages and conditions, you have to negotiate with us." The main speaker, Unions NSW Secretary Mark Lennon, was careful not to be so

explicit, but his central theme was to call for the reinstatement of the power of the IRC—the so-called independent “umpire”—to adjudicate on wages and conditions.

The government’s industrial legislation has directed the IRC to impose the 2.5 percent limit on pay rises, with another 1.5 percent available for trading off basic conditions. The previous state Labor government had also set a 2.5 percent pay cap, but worked to administer it via the unions and the IRC. The concern of the trade union bureaucrats is that O’Farrell has undermined their role as the chief bargaining agents in cutting workers’ conditions.

Lennon said the government’s legislation was “an unprecedented attack on employee rights—the right to bargain and independent arbitration.” He barely mentioned the job cuts and the privatisation of basic services, including Sydney Ferries. Demagogically, he accused O’Farrell of sacrificing public sector workers “on the altar of a triple-A credit rating.”

What Lennon did not disclose was that the state Labor Party leader, former Unions NSW Secretary John Robertson, had just delivered his budget-in-reply speech in parliament, in which he accused the government of having “endangered the state’s AAA credit rating” by producing a budget deficit. Robertson boasted that the previous state Labor government had achieved a triple-A rating by delivering “15 out of 16 Budget surpluses” and, by implication, pledged to carry out even more severe measures than the Liberals.

The Labor government’s pro-market record of cuts to health, education and other services, erosion of public transport and other infrastructure, and efforts to privatise the electricity network led to its landslide defeat in the March state elections. Significantly, neither Lennon nor any other speaker even referred to the Labor Party, whose program the trade unions policed for 16 years.

Robertson was reportedly told he was not welcome to speak at the rally, even though the unions are desperate to revive support for Labor. Clearly, the union bureaucrats were anxious to suppress any political discussion whatsoever, because that would point to the need for a conscious break from Labor.

All of the official speakers narrowly focussed on the NSW Liberal government with no mention of the fact that state Labor governments were carrying out similar measures in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania or that the federal Labor government is cost-cutting to fulfil its promise to balance the budget. Nor was there any reference to the wave of job cuts hitting private sector workers let alone the struggles of workers in Europe and around the world against the austerity agenda being demanded by the financial markets.

Lennon and other speakers instead pushed nationalist notions, presenting Australia as an exception to the global processes, with comments such as “we are not America,” which serve to sow complacency and divide the working class internationally. The reality is that governments and corporations around the world are demanding that workers bear the brunt of the worst crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

At the conclusion of the rally, Lennon offered no way forward, except to send mobile phone text messages to O’Farrell, saying “Not happy Barry.” He exhorted the participants to “remain active” and “get involved” in future union protests. O’Farrell responded with contempt, declaring that the rally was “inconveniencing the public pointlessly because the policy is not going to change.”

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of the SEP’s September 7 statement, “Reject the NSW budget cuts! A socialist strategy to defend jobs and conditions!” and copies of the SEP’s recently published pamphlet containing the party’s statement outlining a socialist perspective to fight the BlueScope sackings.

In its NSW budget statement, the SEP urged working people to reject the state government’s cost-cutting measures and to break from the Labor and trade union apparatus through the formation of rank-and-file committees. It outlined a socialist perspective on which to link up with other sections of the working class to fight for a workers’ government.



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