

NSW public sector workers face onslaught on jobs and conditions

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Barely a month ago, nearly 40,000 public sector workers marched through Sydney, displaying their determination to fight the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government's destruction of more than 5,000 jobs, real wage cuts, elimination of basic conditions and privatisation plans. Yet the offensive by Premier Barry O'Farrell's government has only escalated since.

Not only has the below-inflation wage cap of 2.5 percent remained, but every budget cut is proceeding and thousands of jobs are being axed via attrition and redundancies. Last week, distraught transport department staff members were summoned to individual interviews. They were handed "letters of intent", informing many that they have no jobs in the new structure, or that they can lodge "Expressions of Interest" for alternative posts, in which their pay and entitlements will be severely reduced.

The transport department provides a warning of what is to come throughout the public sector as the global financial crisis deepens. Already, workers in Australia are starting to experience the kinds of attacks seen in Greece, across Europe and throughout the United States, where jobs, wages and services are being slashed, and living standards lowered by up to 30-40 percent.

Under legislation that passed through state parliament just after the September 8 rally not a single NSW transport employee is guaranteed to keep their job. A new entity, Transport for NSW, employs no staff and can contract out all public transport services.

That the government's agenda is proceeding unchecked is due entirely to the actions of the public

sector unions. Having called the September 8 protest only in order to let off steam, Unions NSW and its affiliates are systematically suppressing all rank and file opposition while holding backroom discussions with government officials over how to implement job cuts.

In transport, according to a recent Public Service Association (PSA) bulletin, "The PSA and other unions under the umbrella of Unions NSW have continued to meet with the Director General Transport for NSW." Meanwhile, hundreds of workers have already received letters from the director general's human resources manager telling them that they no longer have a job.

Unions NSW underscored that its perspective is to collaborate with the job cuts at a recently-held combined transport unions delegates' meeting. It invited Trevor Dobbyn, a union official from the neighbouring state of Victoria, to describe how the unions decided not to fight the privatisation of public transport there in the early 1990s. Dobbyn boasted that, while over 11,000 transport jobs were destroyed, the unions had survived. In other words, union officials claim a victory when thousands of jobs are axed but their services are retained as a corporate agency of management.

The NSW public sector unions are reading from the same script. They are appealing to the O'Farrell government to work with them to achieve cost-cutting via "collective bargaining" and "independent arbitration" in the industrial courts, as the previous state Labor government did for 16 years. Their counterparts in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania are collaborating with the Labor governments

in those states as they slash jobs, pay and public services on a scale exceeding what O’Farrell is doing in NSW.

At the same time, the unions are determined to prevent any challenge to the federal Labor government, as it carries out similar wage- and cost-cutting to fulfil its promise to the financial markets to eliminate the budget deficit.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government is spearheading a restructuring of the economy—including the elimination of nearly 2,000 jobs by BlueScope and OneSteel in the steel industry and more than 1,000 jobs by Qantas – in order to make Australian capitalism more “competitive” amid the gathering global slump.

At BlueScope the steel unions worked hand in glove with the Labor government and the company management to bring about an “orderly closure”. Likewise, in the NSW public sector, the unions are working to ensure that any organised resistance is blocked and workers are left isolated.

In order to fight the attack on their jobs and conditions NSW public sector workers have to face two facts: 1) No struggle can go forward unless it is organized independently of and against the sabotage of the trade union apparatuses and 2) They are in a political fight against the O’Farrell and Gillard governments and the corporate profit system they defend.

Independent rank and file committees, outside the control of the unions, need to be established to organise the opposition to the job-cutting program through the public sector and to turn for support to other sections of workers.

Above all, this means turning to a new political perspective. Working people have suffered decades of wholesale reversals at the hands of Labor and the unions, from the pro-market restructuring of Hawke and Keating in the 1980s and 1990s through to the further attacks by Rudd and Gillard and in NSW under Carr, Iemma, Rees and Keneally.

The political subordination of the working class to Labor and the unions, on the basis that they are subject to mass pressure from below, has led to a political impasse. A new leadership is necessary, based on a socialist and internationalist program. To defend the fundamental social rights of working people—including to decent jobs and social services—a workers’ government must be established that will completely reorganise society to meet the needs of the whole population, not the private wealth and profits of a tiny minority, the “one percent” of the business and financial aristocracy.

We urge public sector workers, and all our readers, to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss this perspective.



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