

# Construction workers protest in Melbourne

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About 10,000 construction workers took “illegal” strike action yesterday and protested in central Melbourne against the Victorian state Liberal government’s new draconian industry code of conduct. Socialist Equality Party campaigners and the SEP candidate in the Melbourne by-election, Patrick O’Connor, spoke with workers about the need for a political struggle against both the state Liberal and federal Labor governments, which are conspiring to drive down wages and undermine conditions in the construction industry in order to boost profits.

Premier Ted Baillieu’s revised Victorian Code of Practice for the Building and Construction Industry took effect on July 1. Construction companies and contractors must comply with the code in order to win government tenders for building projects. The code places greater restrictions on trade unions’ access to construction sites, bars enterprise agreements that include any restrictions on the hiring of casuals and part-time workers, eliminates seniority-based redundancy arrangements, and bars union stewards from conducting site inductions for new workers, a measure that has potential safety implications. The code also compels companies to initiate court action against workers who take industrial action contrary to the federal Labor government’s anti-strike Fair Work Australia legislation.

Underscoring the provocative character of the new measures, the Baillieu government has appointed Nigel Hadgkiss as head of the Construction Code Compliance Unit. Hadgkiss is a former commissioner with the Australian Building and Construction Commissioner (ABCC), a body created by the former Howard federal government that had sweeping powers to conduct secret interrogations of workers and imprison anyone who failed to comply. On the same day as the rally yesterday, the *Australian Financial Review* published a front-page story on Hadgkiss, who said he would be recruiting ex-police officers to enforce the new code. He declared that any companies that failed to withhold wages and pursue action against workers participating in the “illegal” rally could be blacklisted from future government contracts.

The state government’s agenda is to slash labour costs in the construction industry. Shortages of skilled builders, plumbers, electricians and other tradespeople, caused by the mining boom, have triggered wage increases. Big business and the media responded with outrage when it was revealed that many workers on a desalination plant construction site in Wonthaggi, near Melbourne, were earning between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year. The project was blamed for setting a precedent, with workers on mining and gas construction projects expecting similar wages.

Last Tuesday, the chairman of the oil and gas firm Woodside, Michael Chaney, complained that “construction costs were already among the highest in the world and there was no doubt some projects would not be economically viable because of costs.”

The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is spearheading the drive to reduce workers’ wages. The Labor government retained the ABCC for four years, then transferred almost all its powers to a new Fair Work Building & Construction regulator. At an economic forum last month, Gillard agreed with Baillieu’s demand that construction costs needed to be lowered. She rejected the Victorian premier’s request for a Productivity Commission inquiry into the issue, instead endorsing a proposal by the unions for tripartite “working groups” involving business, unions and government figures.

The unions’ proposal for closer collaboration with the construction companies underscores that their central concern is to maintain their privileged position in the construction industry. Yesterday’s rally was organised by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). After marching from Trades Hall to the state parliament, several officials from the CFMEU, the Electrical Trades Union and the Plumbing Trades Employees Union addressed the rally. Each denounced Baillieu, while covering up the role played by the Labor Party, saying nothing about Gillard or the Fair Work industrial regime.

Patrick O'Connor and SEP campaigners received a warm response from construction workers as they distributed the party's by-election statement.

**Heath**, a young plumber, said: "This is an attempt to bring back John Howard's industrial laws—AWAs [Australian Work Agreements]. This is how it all starts. Now when you can find yourself fined or even jailed just for standing up for your rights. Everyone has the right to stand up for themselves."

O'Connor asked what Heath thought of the role being played by the federal Labor government. "Every government is going to try to get us," he replied. "They're all the same at the end of the day."

O'Connor explained that the Gillard government was working with Labor and Liberal state governments around Australia to try to drive down wages to boost corporate profits. "CEOs in the mining sector and other industries are now complaining that Australian construction projects are among the most expensive in the world," the SEP candidate said. "As far as the business and financial elite is concerned, it is intolerable that some groups of building workers have been able to increase their wages in the last period."

Heath replied: "We got a 5 percent annual wage rise in our last EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement]." O'Connor said: "This was met with outrage in the media, yet 5 percent is only a little more than the official increase in living costs." Heath answered: "That's right." His friend **Ryan** commented: "And now they're bringing in the carbon tax, so our electricity costs are going to go up by even more." Heath added: "The carbon tax is just another tax to take money off us."

Asked about the Gillard government, **Daniel**, an electrician for 22 years, replied: "If you'd asked me is there any left-wing politics in Australia today, I'd say no. Quite frankly, the Labor Party is not the Labor Party that was born out of the union movement. It's almost like the Labor Party went to the right to get more electable and then the Liberal Party went even further right, so all we've had was a quantum leap in politics to the right. The only exception to that is maybe the Greens, a little bit."

SEP supporters explained the Greens represented a privileged, middle class layer that was hostile to the interests of working people. "The latte left!" said Daniel. "That's my point—there is no true left politics in Australia."

**James**, a builder for 30 years, was critical of the union's failure to stop the state government's construction code. "Well it [the rally] really has little effect," he said. "We should have a wider action, and for more than one day. The government just picks us off one at a time. We should be out with the nurses, ambulance guys and teachers but they all get knocked off by themselves, and nothing changes."

**Robert** explained that he had been working on a liquefied natural gas project in Darwin, Northern Territory. "There are shit conditions," he explained. "There are no travel allowances and other entitlements you get on other sites, and you're paid \$10 an hour less than you would doing the same work on other sites, for Shell, for example."

Robert said that he was marching despite receiving a text message from his employer threatening sanctions under Labor's Fair Work laws if he joined the industrial action. Asked about the Labor government, he replied: "The ABCC is still present. All that's happened is that the name has changed. We're still being attacked. Workers' right to associate, to protest and to express yourself isn't recognised." Robert compared the anti-democratic laws targeting construction workers with some of the measures imposed by fascist governments in Europe in the 1930s.

After O'Connor explained that the SEP was standing in the Melbourne by-election as part of its fight to advance the independent interests of the working class in opposition to all the major parties, Robert wished the candidate luck and said he would carefully read the SEP election statement.

*See the SEP website for further information on election campaign.*

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