

Australia: Devastating cuts to Queensland public sector jobs and services

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Public sector jobs and services are being decimated across the Australian state of Queensland, as part of a new wave of devastating austerity measures throughout the country. Fresh reports of damaging cuts are emerging every day, making it clear that the impact on essential social programs—public health, education, transport and housing—goes far deeper than the destruction of 14,000 jobs announced in the September 11 Queensland state budget.

Premier Campbell Newman's Liberal-National Party (LNP) state government fraudulently claimed that none of the job cuts would occur in "front line services." It is clear from interviews that workers have given to the WSWs, and from reports in the corporate media, that this was a blatant lie.

Health workers have reported that among the 4,140 redundancies in the public hospitals and health system, about 400 dieticians—whose services are critical for many patients—were retrenched last week. A regional health and hospital service, in the northern city of Townsville, announced the abolition of 45 nurses' positions. Ambulance crews and health promotion workers have also been cut, while public hospital pathologists have been told that their services are to be privatised within months, ending the provision of free services.

Main Roads workers have revealed that their workforce has been reduced by almost a half in some depots. Court reporting staff have been given six months' notice of their work being outsourced to private contractors.

Confronted by widespread anger, Premier Newman claimed that no-one had actually been sacked—instead they were offered "voluntary" redundancies. In reality, over the past two weeks, thousands of public sector

workers have received retrenchment notifications. Media outlets have been inundated by reports from public servants that they had been dismissed or given ultimatums to either take a so-called voluntary redundancy or face redeployment and/or retrenchment later without any redundancy payout.

On top of the direct job cuts, community services provided by non-government agencies are being defunded, including the state's 23 tenant advice and advocacy services statewide. Private tenants make up one-third of the state's population and include some of the most vulnerable members of the working class, such as single parents. About 10,000 severely disabled people have had a \$400 per year cap placed on their taxi fare subsidy scheme, forcing them to drastically reduce their travel, including for employment, family purposes and medical treatment.

Public sector workers, including teachers, are also facing far-reaching attacks on their working conditions, and the services they provide. The government is demanding the stripping away of more than 20 conditions for teachers, including class-size targets, and less planning time, while offering annual pay rises of only 2.7 percent, well below the rising cost of living.

All this is proceeding despite the largest demonstrations for many years in Queensland. The day after the budget, thousands of workers rallied throughout the state, including 10,000 in Brisbane, the state capital, showing the determination of the working class to fight to defend jobs and conditions.

From the outset, however, the trade unions have sought to limit the campaign and channel the anger into re-electing a Labor government, which made its own deep inroads into essential public services. Queensland Council of Unions (QCU) president John Battams told the Brisbane rally that all workers could do was support

a “union and community campaign” that continued for “1,000 days” up to the next state election in 2015. Union officials led chants of “We’ll be sacking Campbell Newman in three years.”

Underscoring Labor’s own support for the austerity agenda, state opposition leader Annastacia Palaszczuk used her budget reply speech in parliament on September 13 to insist that the previous state Labor government would have returned the budget to surplus just as quickly as the conservatives.

Attempting to make a contrast with Newman’s policies, Palaszczuk declared that Labor had planned to eliminate thousands of jobs “through a carefully-managed voluntary program, not through mass sackings.” Labor’s redundancies would have been no more “voluntary” than Newman’s. The only difference is that Labor would have relied more openly on the assistance of the trade unions, which collaborated with the program of wholesale privatisation and job cuts inflicted by the former state Labor government, to suppress the resistance of workers.

The unions are prepared to work just as closely with the Liberal National government against the working class as they did with Labor. They have spent months pleading with Newman to negotiate on the means to impose spending cuts and job losses. Just before the budget, the QCU declared that the government’s lowering its target of public sector job cuts to 14,000 had been a “victory,” achieved by union pressure.

Last Friday, the Queensland Teachers Union postponed industrial action by teachers, who had just voted overwhelmingly for work bans and stoppages. After weeks of confidential negotiations with the government in the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), the union said “only a handful of issues” remained to be settled. Teachers are being kept in the dark over the IRC discussions—a clear sign that the union is preparing a sellout.

The unions are also seeking to exploit the hostility to the state LNP government to call for the reelection of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The federal Labor government, however, is spearheading the austerity drive demanded by the corporate elite with its promise of budget surpluses. Already in the process of eliminating 12,000 public sector jobs, it preparing to cut far deeper to overcome a budget shortfall produced by plummeting mining and other tax revenues.

Since the Queensland budget, the financial markets have insisted that the state and federal governments must deliver even greater cuts. Fitch ratings agency immediately downgraded Queensland’s rating from AA+ to AA-, asserting that the budget measures were not enough to overcome the slide in the state’s revenues due to lower mining receipts, cuts to federal grant payments, higher unemployment and loss of consumer confidence. Standard and Poor’s warned that the Gillard government was headed for a \$20 to \$25 billion deficit without deeper austerity measures.

With Australia’s mining boom collapsing amid a worsening global economic crisis, the cuts in Queensland are a forewarning of even more severe measures at all levels of government.



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