

Australia: Union sells out NSW public sector workers

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Yet another union betrayal hailed as a victory. On February 12, the Public Service Association (PSA) in the state of New South Wales (NSW) accepted in full the state government's terms to end a protracted pay dispute. After mass stoppages last September and October, the union has now foisted onto 80,000 public sector workers a pay rise of just 2.5 percent—the maximum or “cap” that the government had imposed from the outset.

The outcome has a particular significance because, in the wake of last year's strikes, the PSA membership voted out the old Labor Party-aligned leadership. The so-called Progressive PSA (PPSA) faction now controls the union's central council and one of its members, the Greens' Anne Gardiner, is the new general secretary. The PPSA, which includes the pseudo-left organisations Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, is directly responsible for the sell-out.

The Liberal government of Premier O'Farrell got exactly what it wanted. So grateful was State Treasurer Mike Baird that he publicly thanked the union for accepting the government's wage cap. “We are certainly appreciative of that and we think this is a good outcome... It has been a long-running dispute. Certainly we've seen court action, we've seen strikes, but today we have seen sense and reason,” he told the media.

For her part, Gardiner declared that the PSA had won “a major first-round victory” because, she argued, the government had withdrawn a proposed award that further eroded working conditions and entitlements.

No one should be fooled by the new PSA general secretary's sophistry. The O'Farrell government had applied for the award to “offset” wage claims by the union that exceeded the 2.5 percent cap. Since the union had unconditionally accepted the wage cap, the

government had no need to proceed. As Baird explained, “With the PSA reconsidering its position and now accepting 2.5 percent, we will today discontinue that application before the IRC.”

Gardiner justified the union's abject capitulation by referring to a High Court decision in December, which dismissed the PSA's claim that the wage cap was unconstitutional. “We have had to comply with the ruling of the High Court,” she told ABC radio, adding: “The PSA will continue to fight the wage legislation and have this law repealed.”

The PSA has no intention of fighting on this matter or any other. Last October 8, thousands of public sector workers took strike action and risked heavy fines by defying an Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) ban. But the PSA had no intention of holding anything more than a one-off protest. After the strike, it quickly shut down the campaign, calling off its work bans. Last week the union not only accepted the High Court decision, but even issued a formal apology for breaching the IRC order.

Like the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia legislation, NSW laws covering public sector workers ban virtually all strike action except during bargaining periods. Even then the IRC can impose bans if it deems action not in the “public interest.” Any concerted campaign against this legal straitjacket would inevitably require a turn to other sections of workers in NSW and nationally, resulting in a confrontation not only with the state Liberal government, but the federal Labor government as well. Such a struggle is anathema to the PSA leadership—the Labor-aligned and PPSA factions alike.

When Gardiner speaks of an on-going campaign, she is referring to the union's preoccupation with fighting for the re-election of the Labor Party at the state and

federal level. Her opposition to the state Liberal O’Farrell government has got nothing to do with its attacks on the working class. After all it is simply continuing with the cutbacks to public spending and the strengthening of industrial legislation put in place by successive NSW Labor governments.

At the federal level, the Labor government enforces the on-going “reform” program in every state via the “Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations”, which it introduced in November 2008. Under this Agreement, federal funding for the states, outside of general revenue from the Goods and Services Tax (GST), is tied to meeting targets and efficiencies in every area—from health and education to housing and training. With a slump in GST income estimated at \$12 billion for 2012 and 2013, all state governments are under intense pressure to cut costs and restructure social services.

Having accepted the state government’s wage diktat and shut down its campaign, the PSA has opened the door for the O’Farrell government to accelerate its plans to slash 15,000 public sector jobs, devastating crucial services throughout the state. The union’s claim that it will fight the job cuts is a sham. It does not oppose the destruction of jobs: it objects to how it will be carried out.

Speaking on ABC radio last week, Gardiner offered the union’s services to rationalise the process, complaining that the job cuts were proceeding “without any plan from the government, without any cost-benefit analysis, with individual departmental heads chopping and not reporting back.” She “demanded” that “some type of plan be presented to the public sector workers”—in order to ensure the union’s continuing involvement.

Gardiner’s comments are a warning to all public sector workers that the PSA will continue to collaborate with the NSW government in slashing jobs. As far back as last July, leaked Treasury documents identified the targets for the next four years: including more than 900 jobs in the Department of Family and Community Services; over 3,600 in health; at least 2,400 in education; nearly 400 in Roads and Maritime Services; and 350 in environmental services. With the complicity of the PSA and other unions, this job destruction program is already underway.

Public sector workers should draw definite political

lessons from the PSA’s latest betrayal. Having defied the courts and risked huge fines, they have wound up with the Liberal government’s wage rise—in fact, a cut in real wages—and confront a deepening onslaught on jobs. Moreover, the new “progressive” leadership, working hand-in-glove with the old Labor-aligned bureaucrats, has imposed the sell-out.

The pseudo-lefts, whose representatives sit in the PPSA faction, have made no public comment about the outcome of the dispute. In response to phone calls by WSWS to the national offices of the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, no one was available for comment. Promises to return calls never eventuated. That is because both organisations are committed to maintaining the best of relations with Gardiner and the rest of the union bureaucracy, and collaborating with them in their attempts to market this betrayal as a victory.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that public sector workers can only defend their jobs and conditions, as well as vital public services, in a rebellion against the PSA apparatus, including their pseudo-left defenders. That requires the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace, committed to the fight to mobilise other sections of workers in NSW and throughout the country in a political and industrial campaign against the Gillard Labor government and its escalating austerity measures. Such a struggle must be based on a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at ending the capitalist profit system and establishing a workers’ government to meet the interests of the vast majority, not the ultra-wealthy few.



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