

Australia: Locked-out power workers demonstrate in Melbourne

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Seventy-five locked-out power workers, their families and supporters travelled 150 kilometres from Yallourn, in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, to demonstrate in Melbourne last Friday. Energy Australia has locked out the electricity plant operators since June 21 amid a long-standing dispute over a new enterprise agreement.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which covers the workers, organised the rally as a deliberate diversion. The company has maintained operations in the plant by bringing in scab labour from other states. The CFMEU has opposed workers in other Latrobe Valley power plants taking industrial action in support of their locked-out colleagues. CFMEU members are also among 425 Energy Australia workers crossing the picket line to maintain power output.

Despite the company's intransigent stance, the union focussed Friday's protest, held outside Energy Australia's offices, on futile appeals to passers-by to switch their electricity provider, in order to pressure the company to back down. The CFMEU also promoted anti-Chinese chauvinism, declaring the problem was that Energy Australia was owned by the Hong Kong-based CLP Group. In reality, big business as a whole—Australian and non-Australian-owned—is engaged in a ruthless cost-cutting drive.

For three decades, the Latrobe Valley has been hit by a corporate onslaught against jobs and conditions, which the trade unions have played the crucial role in enforcing. In the 1980s, a state Labor government corporatised the state-owned power generators, paving the way for their privatisation by Premier Jeff Kennett's Liberal government in the 1990s, triggering nearly 10,000 job losses.

The latest Energy Australia dispute has continued for almost a year. The workers took industrial action in

March and April, with a 48-hour strike on April 18 and 19. The unresolved issues in the negotiations between the company and the CFMEU include plant staffing levels, dispute resolution mechanisms, and "consultation" arrangements related to shift times and annual leave.

One worker, who spoke anonymously due to company threats against anyone speaking publicly, told the WSW: "We're seeking better conditions, not just for ourselves but for workers here in the future. We want the same conditions in the other power plants in the Latrobe Valley. In 2000 we were locked out, and in an arbitrated settlement we lost a lot of our conditions on shifts and annual leave. We've been trying to win these back ever since."

The worker added: "This dispute is about setting a precedent for attacks on other workers. It's now eight weeks to the day that we've been locked out. People are starting to suffer. Money is starting to dry up. I have had to start using money I set aside as a nest egg."

Energy Australia is reportedly mothballing capacity because of low wholesale electricity prices and slack demand, especially from the declining manufacturing industry. The company last year generated profit of \$142 million, even though earnings were down more than 40 percent from 2011 due to decreased electricity demand. In late 2012, the company shut down a unit at Yallourn, although higher summer demand saw it restarted. During 2013, the unit has only operated intermittently.

Another locked-out worker explained: "The company refused to negotiate. Their agenda is that they don't need the whole power station working now. They have had a lot of trouble in getting coal ... [and] they can't sell power now. It suits them to lock us out."

In 2000, the state Labor government intervened on

behalf of the company. It forced the locked-out maintenance workers to end their industrial campaign, threatening to use draconian Electricity Services legislation against them. (See “Labor Party invokes emergency measures against Australian electricity workers”)

Officially, the federal Labor government is monitoring the current dispute. At the beginning of the lockout, a spokesman for industrial relations minister Bill Shorten lined up with Energy Australia in issuing slanderous accusations of sabotage against the power workers. On the day the lockout began, a fire broke out inside the plant. It was caused by an electrical problem that had nothing to do with the workers, who were all accounted for in another part of the plant. Shorten’s spokesman nevertheless declared: “We condemn any proven unlawful conduct and note the police are investigating the switchboard fire.” Victorian Labor leader Daniel Andrews added: “It is completely unacceptable that the state’s energy generation can be threatened in this way.”

Energy Australia has been able to act in such a provocative manner because of the legal protection it enjoys under the Labor government’s Fair Work industrial legislation. This prohibits all but the narrowest forms of industrial action, while giving employers a free hand to impose lockouts.

At the Melbourne rally, the unions covered up the role being played by the federal Labor government.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Dave Oliver declared that the situation confronting workers would be far worse if the opposition Liberal-National Coalition won the September 7 election. This promotion of the Labor government was accompanied by a lengthy complaint against what Oliver described as “militant employers,” such as Qantas and Xstrata. Notably, General Motors Holden was not mentioned, where the unions and the Labor government have pushed through an agreement freezing wages and gutting conditions for production workers in South Australia. This omission was not accidental—as far as the union bureaucrats are concerned, problems only emerge when corporate executives seek to sideline them, and fail to utilise their services as industrial police to enforce restructuring measures.

CFMEU national secretary Michael O’Connor and

Victorian secretary John Setka issued empty pledges of solidarity. Neither explained why CFMEU members were among those still working in the Yallourn plant, nor why no other section of workers within the power or construction industry had been mobilised in support of the locked-out plant operators.

The unions also handed the platform to Father Bob Maguire, a Catholic priest and media figure, who condemned “class warfare,” insisting that “industrial disorder means social disorder.” Setka declared the speech “inspiring.”

In reality, the problem is not “class warfare” but the fact that only one side is fighting—the employers aided by the unions and governments at the state and federal level.

To avoid defeat, the Yallourn workers have to break with the CFMEU, form their own rank and file committee, and turn out to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks. This includes power workers throughout the Latrobe Valley and across Australia, as well as workers at Holden and Ford, mining and construction workers, and those in the public sector.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective and leadership, based on the fight for a revolutionary party that aims to establish a workers’ government committed to socialist policies, including taking the power industry out of corporate hands and establishing publicly owned utilities under the democratic control of the working class.



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