Australia: Thousands protest against budget

Our reporters
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About 20,000 workers, including building workers, dock workers, teachers, health and other public sector employees, marched in Melbourne yesterday against the Abbott government's budget measures—the most serious assault on education, health, welfare, aged pensions, youth and students in post-World War II Australian history.

Demonstrators carried banners and placards and chanted: "They say cutback, we say fightback" and "No ifs, no buts, we'll stop these budget cuts." Called by the trade unions, the "Block the Budget" demonstration was only a small indication of the widespread popular outrage against the government.

The only speakers were senior union bureaucrats—13 in all—who berated the Abbott government while covering up the record of the previous Labor governments, which initiated the social assault now being carried forward by the Liberal-National coalition.

In 2012–13, the Labor-Greens government imposed the biggest cuts to social spending in 25 years, eliminated about 3,000 public sector jobs, imposed a 2.5 percent cap on public service pay increases and made deep inroads into social security entitlements, including major cuts to single parents. Backed by the unions, Labor also oversaw the destruction of thousands of jobs in the car, steel and other manufacturing industries.

Australian Council of Trades Unions (ACTU) secretary Dave Oliver told the demonstrators that the protest was "just the beginning." The unions would "see this rotten government off," he declared. "Stay angry, maintain the rage." Other officials claimed that the Abbott administration would be a "one-term government." Workers were told to attend an ACTU national protest scheduled for July 6, almost three months after the budget was announced.

This line underscored the real purpose of the "Block the Budget" campaign: to divert the ongoing outrage of workers behind harmless appeals to parliament and for the return of a Labor government. Anything that threatens to move beyond this agenda will not be tolerated. That was demonstrated at a mass meeting of some 500 union delegates in Sydney later in the day.

Addressing the Sydney meeting, Unions NSW secretary Mark Lennon re-wrote Labor's record, claiming that there had been "a growth in the social safety net" over the past three decades. Australia was a "decent, mature, developed, prosperous economy" which was being destroyed by the ideologically driven Abbott government. The Unions NSW resolution called for union members to participate in the July 6 protest, sign petitions and lobby local MPs. "This will be a long campaign," he declared.

Lennon refused to allow any discussion on an amendment moved by Susan Price, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, which "welcomed" the unions' bogus campaign, called on Labor and the Greens to block the budget and asked the ACTU and its state affiliates to organise a "national day of action" involving industrial stoppages and community protests, timed to coincide with the debate on the budget in the Senate.

To bolster illusions in the parliamentary manoeuvres, as well as the role of the unions, Price falsely claimed that a 1976 general strike, which was betrayed by the unions, had defeated attacks on Medibank by the Fraser Liberal government.

In a blatantly anti-democratic display, Lennon refused to even allow any discussion on the amendment, or any other motion advanced at the meeting, declaring that it would cause "disunity." The union bureaucracy is determined to block any opposition or action, no matter how limited, that could trigger a wider movement of the working class and threaten its agenda.

A union delegate challenged Lennon, declaring, "It's not your right up there to decide. We're holding a democratic movement here. An amendment has been put and has to be voted on before your resolution."

Lennon was booed by sections of the meeting after he brushed aside the objections. Lennon then called for a vote on the official resolution three times before simply declaring it passed and closing down the meeting.

Yesterday's events further demonstrate that a genuine

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struggle against the Abbott government must begin as a revolt against the Labor and union bureaucracy. A Socialist Equality Party statement was circulated at the rallies, entitled: "Fight budget austerity! A socialist perspective for Australian workers."

The statement warned that union bureaucrats were seeking to channel the enormous anger over the budget back behind the return of a Labor-Greens government—"in other words, the same kind of pro-business, anti-working class administration that paved the way for Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Liberal-National government in the first place."

The statement called for "a political break from the Labor and union bureaucracy and the formation of independent rank-and-file workers' organisations to fight for the establishment of a workers' government, committed to totally reorganising economic and social life to meet the needs of the majority, not boost the profits of a tiny minority."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those attending yesterday's meetings in Sydney and Melbourne.

In Melbourne, **Stephano**, final year apprentice boilermaker, said: "The future for young people is very hard. The latest budget cuts the tool allowance for new apprentices. This allowance helped me out a lot but I'm going to miss one final payment worth $1,500 because of the cuts. I've no guarantee of work after this year."

Paul, a stevedore for 16 years, said: "They want us to work for a pittance. We have to make a stand and keep the conditions that we've fought for over decades. Conditions at my work have changed. Every day when you go in, the company wants more and more for less. In the last 18 months, 30 people have been sacked. People have been injured and now the company has the right to sack them after only three months of being injured at work."

Fei, a construction worker from China, said: "Everybody works so hard, then suddenly there are so many cuts. Melbourne is meant to be the world's most liveable city but it is very expensive. I think this is the year that the economic crisis is really going to hit Australia."

In Sydney, **Denis**, the delegate who challenged Lennon, said: "I'm 100 percent for fighting this government over the budget. What I was saying at the meeting is that an amendment was put for strike action against the budget and it is democratic procedure to vote on that amendment. A union rally on a Sunday is OK but we've already had two of these—March in March and March in May. Taking industrial action shows the government that we mean what we say and that means striking on a working day.

"Unions NSW don't want this. They want the whole thing tied up with the Labor Party. The biggest mistake in the fight against WorkChoices was to allow the campaign against the anti-union laws to be broken up when Labor was elected in 2007. We were told that everything would be all right because Labor was in. But those laws are still there—all they did was change the names—and CFMEU members in Western Australia have been fined thousands of dollars and could have their homes seized. Nothing's been said about this."

Jackie, an Australian Services Union member who works with the disabled, said: "The budget is disgusting, every aspect of it—the attacks on health and education, social welfare. These are services which everyone needs—and there seems to be no end to it. The government says everybody must share in helping the economy, but we didn't create the mess. I've been working all my life and I'm as poor now as when I was a student.

"These governments live in a different world. They have absolutely no idea of how workers live and what they have to go through. Pensioners, students and young unemployed are easy targets as far as the government is concerned. Disabled people are going to be much worse off. They have to visit doctors and specialists and pay for tests and medications all the time. How are they supposed to pay for this?"

Dan, a merchant seaman, said: "This budget's designed to change the social fabric of our nation to a harsher more mean-spirited race to bottom. It should be blocked in the Senate and a double dissolution election called." Commenting on Lennon's conduct of the meeting, he said: "They [the union leadership] were losing control and that's how they assert their dominance—through undemocratic principles."

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