

Low attendance at Australian anti-budget rallies exposes unions' role

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The demonstrations held yesterday in cities and towns across Australia against the budget brought down by the Abbott Liberal government testified to the reactionary and moribund character of the trade unions as they seek to suppress any independent struggle of the working class.

Organisations that formally have 2.5 million members mobilised less than 20,000 people in Melbourne, the country's major manufacturing centre. In Adelaide, where the closure of General Motors Holden in 2017 will cause the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, less than 5,000 people took part.

In Sydney, with a population of 4.5 million, barely 10,000 turned up to the protest in the city's centre. Thousands of bright orange placards, which had been printed by the union umbrella body, Unions NSW, in anticipation of a large turnout, lay in large heaps on the ground or, still in wrapping paper, remained stacked on shipping pallets.

In the national capital Canberra, where thousands of federal public servants have been made redundant or are in the process of losing their jobs as a result of either the cuts imposed by the former Labor government or by Abbott's budget, just 500 assembled at parliament house. Rallies in Brisbane and Perth, and major regional centres such as Newcastle and Geelong, drew crowds of less than 1,000.

The reason why workers stayed away was not out of lack of concern for the budget's sweeping attacks on health, education and social welfare, or for the deepening social inequality that wracks Australian society. There is, in fact, overwhelming opposition. But after decades of witnessing the unions collaborate in the endless undermining of social conditions, jobs and wages, millions of workers do not view them as organisations that fight for their interests. Union

membership has plunged from close to 57 percent of the workforce in 1982 to just 18 percent—and barely 12 percent in the private sector. Such is the alienation from the unions, especially within the younger generation, that more than seven million workers have never belonged to one, while another 1.3 million have let their membership lapse.

The political perspective advanced at the July 6 rallies served only to underscore why workers are repelled by the thoroughly corporatised and corrupt union apparatus. From start to finish, the events reflected the virulent opposition of the unions to any action that could disrupt the implementation of the budget measures or the broader big business offensive underway against jobs, wages and working conditions.

The sole purpose of the protests was to promote lies and try to confine opposition to the dead-end of returning a Greens-backed Labor government at the next election. Mark Lennon, secretary of Unions NSW, who chaired the rally in Sydney, last featured in the news for bureaucratically closing down a union delegates' meeting on June 12, in order to stop workers voting for even a token one-day strike.

Both Lennon and Dave Oliver, secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), insisted that the budget reflected nothing more than the right-wing ideology of Abbott and his ministers. Everything was done to conceal the fact that the austerity measures initiated by the former Labor government, and now being taken further by the Liberal/National Coalition, are part of a global onslaught on the working class stemming from the economic breakdown that has resulted from the financial crash of September 2008.

In Melbourne, no representative of the unions even bothered to address the demonstration. It was left to the demagogic media commentator Van Badham, a priest

and advocates for pensioners and single parents, to rail against Abbott and tell the audience what they already knew—that budget cuts to welfare will have a devastating impact on the living standards of some of the poorest sections of society.

Nowhere was any issue made of the fact that Labor and the Greens had already passed the budget appropriation bills on June 25, giving an even more surreal character to the unused Unions NSW placards demanding no cuts to health, welfare, education, foreign aid and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The bills passed 11 days earlier by Labor and the Greens had included \$80 billion in health and education cuts over the next 10 years, a \$7.6 billion cut to foreign aid and \$50 million in cuts to the ABC.

Attempting to ignore this reality, speaker after speaker promoted the unions' claim that Labor, the Greens and other opposition parties would “bust the budget” in the parliament's upper house, the Senate. According to the unions, the working class should place its hopes in the six right-wing Senators, from the Palmer United Party, the Motoring Enthusiast Party, the Democratic Labor Party and the Liberal Democratic Party, who took their seats for the first time today. Sordid backroom deals are already taking place between the government and this group, as well as with Labor and the Greens, to ensure that the budget agenda is implemented.

The unions also sought to ensure that no criticism was raised at the rallies of the support given by Labor and the Greens to the increase in annual military spending by nearly 20 percent, to \$27.6 billion by 2017–18. Along with the parliamentary establishment and the corporate media, the unions are part of the conspiracy of silence that surrounds the central involvement of the Australian government in the US war preparations against China in the Asia-Pacific region.

Socialist Equality Party members and supporters distributed the party's statement, “The way forward in the fight against budget austerity and militarism”, at the rallies. In numerous discussions and in interviews they gave to the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers and young people expressed their anger and frustration at the political situation.

As the SEP's statement insisted, the critical issue in the period ahead is the building of the SEP as the new

revolutionary leadership of the working class. There is no way forward in the struggle against austerity and war without the working class establishing its complete political independence from the parliamentary parties and the trade unions, and taking up the fight against the capitalist profit system itself on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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