

Australian workers denounce budget cuts and austerity drive

Our correspondents
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Workers from a variety of industries spoke to WSWs correspondents after yesterday's trade union rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, explaining what issues led them to join the protests and discussing the political questions raised by the speakers' promotion of the perspective of returning another Labor government.

Joel, an air-conditioning worker from the large Barangaroo building site in Sydney, said he was forced to shift from Queensland to Darwin, then to Sydney, to find work in the construction industry.

"I'm here because I want to defend my rights at work," he said. "Most of the blokes had to travel halfway around Australia just to get work... But living away from home allowances have been scrapped and replaced by start-at-the-gate payments. I have travelled to my last three jobs at my own cost."

Joel was incensed by the move by the Abbott government to increase the retirement pension age to 70, on top of the previous Labor government's raising of the age from 65 to 67. "I can't work to 70! Physically, I can't. People will be dying at work and they'll just take them out in wheelbarrows."

Asked about the calls issued at the rally to oust the state and federal Liberal-National governments and, by implication, elect Labor governments, Joel replied: "Just get rid of the Liberals? That doesn't make any difference. It doesn't work like that..."

"We've traded one government for another for long enough now, and no one seems to be getting a better deal... It's a vicious cycle. Eventually it will get to a stage when there will be no wage rises. The minimum wage will be what you get."

When we said the Socialist Equality Party was standing in the New South Wales election to advance the fight for the working class to take power and establish a workers' government that would implement

a socialist program, Joel said: "I don't know if Australian workers are ready for a total commitment, but maybe if someone showed a voice, if maybe the Socialist Equality Party could be the voice, then people could follow."

When the discussion turned to the Abbott government's commitment of 300 more troops to the US-led war in Iraq and Syria, and the wider danger of war, Joel commented on the use of terrorist-scare campaigns by governments around the world to stir up pretexts for military interventions and the victimisation of government opponents domestically.

"Terrorism is an easy script," Joel noted. "You can circulate allegations against one little group and say, 'they're the terrorists, they're their bad guys.' It's easy to do. Who's to say that people who still earn a decent wage, like we do in construction, standing in the street defending our rights, aren't the terrorists? Everyone can get bracketed like that."

Joel voiced scepticism in the Abbott government's response to last December's Sydney café siege, which the government transformed into a national terrorist emergency. "They built it out of proportion. He [the hostage-taker Man Haron Monis] was just an angry guy who was about to go to prison and that was his day, so that he didn't have to go to jail."

Nut-Cea, a Filipino-Australian community services volunteer, was one of many community service workers and volunteers who joined the rallies to protest against the cutting of federal funding to their organisations, which was announced just before Christmas.

"We had our funding removed for this year, so we don't know what is going to happen with us," Nut-Cea explained. "We assist Filipinos who arrive to settle in Australia. We received \$75,000 a year federal funding last year, but now nothing."

“It’s a bigger issue too. It’s all the community services. Services like ours provide English-language assistance to everyone through libraries. I blame the Liberals at the moment for this, because they are the government.”

A retired high school teacher who worked in schools for 35 years said she came to the rally because she was “most upset” by the Abbott government’s budget cuts which were targeted against the poor and disadvantaged. “Let’s have equality,” she said. Although she was a Labor supporter, she admitted: “I don’t know if putting Labor back in will make anything different.”

The retired teacher added that she had been outraged by the previous Labor government’s treatment of refugees. “Kevin Rudd came up with the worst thing in cruelty—sending people to Manus Island!”

The teacher condemned Labor Party leader Bill Shorten for giving bipartisan backing to the decision to dispatch 300 more troops to Iraq. “There should be a referendum on war,” she said. “Bill Shorten shouldn’t have supported the decision to send more troops. He should stand up and be counted. We shouldn’t be fighting along with America. It all started with George W. Bush and Tony Blair in England—that was his downfall.”

David, a bus driver from western Sydney, was angry about the pressure on workers by the private bus firms contracted by the state government. He gave the example of the Liverpool to Parramatta T80 route. “There is not enough time. Every single bus stop you pick up passengers. By the end of the trip you will always be 10–15 minutes late. When you come back for the next trip always the passengers complain. Some of them get aggressive or punch you. But it’s not our fault.”

“We tell the union, but unfortunately the Transport Workers Union is not like it was before. They are more friendly with the employers, honestly. This started under the Labor government. I always said that Labor and Liberals were the same.

“When it is Liberals in government, Labor comes to motivate the unions to come to have demonstration[s] to win support for Labor. But when Labor is in power you can’t see any more demonstrations.”

Discussing the threat of war, David said: “It is all the US, it’s about the economy, it’s about controlling the

oil. Killing people is nothing for them.” He said ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] had originated from the Islamic fundamentalists that Washington had earlier supported in Afghanistan and Syria.

In Melbourne, **Alistair**, a shipyard worker, explained: “I will be out of work this month. Job losses have been going on for decades. The government is not giving people any work to do. I have been at BAE in Williamstown for 33 years. The shipyard employs about 400 people plus contractors... I am 63 years old and I don’t think I will get another job.”

Alistair commented: “I think that BAE is one of the richest companies in the world. War is good business.”

Luke, a building worker for 22 years, said: “The government wants to take our conditions away, such as overtime and double time. Everything is going down. We work like donkeys in the rain and wind at the top of buildings.”

Luke expressed concern about what was happening to workers internationally, and about the future. “Look at what is happening in Greece,” he said. “There are no pensions there. Pensions here are very low already—\$200 a week—and you can’t live on this. How many millions of dollars are going to the war in the Middle East, and how many children are going to cry because their fathers were killed?”



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