

Australian union rallies seek to divert anger over attacks on wages and services

Our reporters
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Amid the deepening crisis of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, staged a "National Day of Action" yesterday to try to head off and contain the intense hostility among workers to the mounting assault on their wages, working conditions and social services.

About 10,000 workers marched through Melbourne, 5,000 rallied in Sydney, and 2,000 in Brisbane, with smaller events in Adelaide, Canberra, Perth, Hobart, Darwin and numbers of regional centres. The trade unions called no stoppages for the rallies, but building workers walked off several major construction sites, despite threats of \$10,400 fines by the federal government's Fair Work Building and Construction agency for taking "unlawful industrial action."

There were also sizeable contingents of nurses and other health workers, alarmed by budget cuts and threats to scrap penalty wage rates—which would amount to wage cuts of up to 30 percent—and community service workers and volunteers, who are fighting the de-funding and possible closure of emergency relief, welfare, health, educational and advisory services.

Banners and placards voiced outrage at an entire range of attacks on the working class, including cuts to health and education spending, and plans for sharp rises in medical and education fees. Others denounced the gutting of funding for hundreds of community services and the widening social inequality. Among the most prominent concerns were moves foreshadowed by the Abbott government's Productivity Commission to abolish penalty rates and cut the minimum wage.

With key austerity measures from the Abbott government's last budget—particularly medical fees, welfare cutoffs and tertiary education fees—still stalled

in the Senate because of the widespread opposition to them, the ACTU bureaucrats called the rallies in the lead-up to this year's budget in May in order to channel the anger back behind the return of yet another Labor government.

Speaking at a Gold Coast rally, ACTU president Ged Kearney said the unions were determined to kick the Liberal-National government out at the next federal election, which is due in 2016. She invoked the prospect of making the Abbott government a "one-term" government, following the recent defeats of the first-term Liberal-National state governments in Victoria and Queensland.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters campaigned at the rallies, explaining that any return to Labor governments would only deepen, not stop, the attacks taking place, and that the working class needed a new political perspective.

At the Sydney rally, SEP candidates in the March 28 New South Wales election, including SEP national secretary James Cogan, discussed with workers the need to take up the fight for a workers' government and a socialist program. Supporters circulated copies of the party's election manifesto and a statement by Cogan exposing the fraud of the Labor Party's claim to oppose privatisation and austerity.

Significantly, there were no Labor Party speakers on the platforms in Melbourne and Sydney, for fear of reviving memories of previous Labor government attacks on jobs, welfare and the public sector.

At the Sydney rally, all the official slogans were directed against Abbott and the electricity grid privatisation plan of his New South Wales state counterpart, Premier Mike Baird. Speakers called on the participants to repeatedly chant "NSW not for sale" and "We say fight back." There was no mention of the

fact that the last state Labor government sold off most of the electricity network, let alone the long record of Labor government privatisations going back to the selloff of Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank by the Hawke government in the 1990s.

Unions NSW secretary Mark Lennon declared: “We are here for one reason alone: to tell Baird and Abbott to leave our work rights alone.” Without once referring to the Labor Party, he and trade union leaders from the building, health, electrical and community services sectors urged workers to “defeat” the Liberal governments, just like they had been “defeated” in Victoria and Queensland.

In Melbourne, ACTU secretary Dave Oliver likewise invoked the 2007 defeat of the previous Howard Liberal-National federal government, without mentioning the anti-working class record of the ensuing Labor government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, which led to its landslide defeat in 2013. “Ten years ago John Howard and his government attacked us,” Oliver said. “We went on and kicked them out. We’re going to fight the Abbott government.”

One exception to the lack of any explicit mention of the Labor Party occurred in Brisbane, where Annastacia Palaszczuk, the new Queensland Labor premier, was called to the stage, where she pledged to “stand up to Abbott and his arrogance.” Palaszczuk claimed: “We now have a new era in Queensland, a government that will listen, a government that will deliver, a government that is focused on jobs—jobs for your family and jobs for future generations.”

In reality, her government has already foreshadowed stepped-up austerity measures because of the collapse of coal, gas and other mining export prices, which are leading to mine closures and thousands of job losses in the former “mining boom” state. Just the previous day, state Treasurer Curtis Pitt reported that during 2014 the state’s economy shrank by 3.4 percent and business investment fell by 20.3 percent.

Palaszczuk’s government is already moving to impose the burden of the slump on workers, just as its Labor predecessor, the government of Premier Anna Bligh, unleashed a \$15 billion privatisation of rail, electricity and other services, destroying thousands of jobs, in 2009 after the financial markets stripped the state of its AAA credit rating amid the global economic breakdown.

As in Queensland, any return to Labor governments at the state or federal level will simply pave the way for even more brutal attacks on working people under conditions of a rapidly deteriorating economic situation in Australia and internationally.

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