

Australian public sector workers reject government pay offer

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More than 10,000 workers at the newly-merged Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) this week voted by a 9-to-1 majority to reject a Liberal-National government pay rise offer of 3.4 percent over three years.

The government “offer” involves the elimination of multiple allowances that could leave some workers \$8,000 a year worse off and overturn arrangements allowing staff access to flexible work hours.

The ballot results came in as DIBP workers began a 10-day campaign of two-hour, twice-daily work stoppages staggered across Australia’s eight international airports, as well as at sea ports and parcel and mail delivery centres.

Tens of thousands of other workers—at Human Services, Employment, Environment, Education, Agriculture, Defence and Veteran Affairs, as well as the Tax Office, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Bureau of Statistics—held half-day strikes on Thursday.

The walkouts are part of a long-running dispute over more than 100 separate enterprise agreements covering up to 160,000 federal public servants, many of whom have been working without work agreements for more than a year.

Earlier this month, thousands of public employees in Canberra, Australia’s capital city, walked off the job for four hours.

The DIBP stoppages, which began on Monday, have affected passenger movements as well as mail and other cargo. According to news reports, up to 90-minute delays have resulted at airports, despite the department’s contingency plans to deploy middle managerial staff.

In July, staff at the former Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS) and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection

struck when the two departments were merged to create the DIBP. The amalgamation abolished a raft of allowances and entitlements, cutting thousands of dollars from workers’ take home pay. The government eventually agreed to maintain the current conditions, but only until negotiations for new enterprise agreements were completed.

This week’s high ballot turnout and decisive result are further indications of deep-going dissatisfaction among federal public sector workers after years of assaults on wages, working conditions and jobs by both Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments, enforced by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and other trade unions.

Up to 14,500 federal public sector jobs were axed under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments’ “efficiency dividends,” with a further estimated 1,500 to 2,000 jobs cut by the Abbott Coalition government in its May 2014 budget. Last December, the government announced the closure of 175 mainly smaller agencies as a step toward the elimination of over 250 agencies to cut costs by more than \$539 million over four years.

As well as slashing jobs, the government is determined to reduce spending by cutting wages and conditions. Negotiations for 118 enterprise agreements covering public servants have dragged on since March 2014, with the government refusing to increase its below-inflation pay offers or drop demands for concessions and trade-offs. Tax office workers, for example, have been offered just 4.5 percent over three years, in return for agreeing to \$96 million in various savings.

The CPSU, which covers the majority of public sector employees, has kept workers divided along departmental lines while tightly restricting all industrial

action and appealing to the government for negotiations on its cost-cutting demands.

Faced with stubborn opposition from employees, the unions so far have only been able to broker enterprise deals covering less than 2 percent of the public sector workforce. Most of these deals have involved trading off hard-won conditions in return for pay rises of only or near 4.5 percent over three years—barely in line with the official inflation rate of 1.5 percent, which itself underestimates the cost of living for working-class families.

In an attempt to block a political confrontation between workers and the federal government, the CPSU is promoting the illusion that Malcolm Turnbull, the new prime minister, can be prevailed upon to act in workers' interests.

Turnbull, who was installed on September 14 after ousting former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, has been tasked by the financial and corporate elite to push through the far-reaching social austerity cuts and other pro-market measures demanded by big business, which had stalled under Abbott.

CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood this week appealed to Turnbull and Michaelia Cash, the new employment minister, to “rethink this failed bargaining policy and work with the union to find a sensible way forward.”

“Meeting the growth, reform and service delivery challenges facing government will require a fundamentally different approach to the public sector... The public sector will play a vital role in government's effort to ensure Australia's future prosperity,” Flood declared.

In other words, the CPSU is ready to do whatever is necessary to impose the Turnbull government's cost-cutting requirements.



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