

Public sector union cancels strike action at Australian airports

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The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) seized on Tuesday's terrorist attack in Brussels to call off planned strikes by Immigration, Border Force and Agriculture public sector workers at international airports in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, today and during the Easter weekend.

The union said it had cancelled the 24-hour strikes after an appeal by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at a press conference on the bombings in Belgium. The CPSU, which covers the majority of federal public sector employees, responded immediately.

"We have agreed to Mr Turnbull's request to postpone these strikes in good faith and conscious of the understandable concerns of travellers in the wake of the Brussels attacks. Our members would never take industrial action that compromises Australia's national security at this time or any time," CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood told the media after Turnbull's appeal.

The union called off the stoppages without any consultation with its members. Rank-and-file Immigration, Border Force or Agriculture workers were given no opportunity to vote on the cancellation before Flood's announcement.

In the first place, the union's rush to shut down industrial action at Australian airports demonstrates, yet again, the support of the union bureaucracy as a whole for the bogus "war on terror," which consists of predatory US-led military aggression throughout the Middle East and the imposition of draconian police powers and mass surveillance at home. Far from protecting the public from terrorism, it is this "war" that has created and heightened the danger of terrorism in Australia and around the world.

Secondly, the CPSU is anxious to prevent the pent-up anger among its members, after years of job cuts, wage

freezes and the erosion of working conditions, from erupting out of its control. And thirdly, with the growing possibility of an early federal election on July 2, following Turnbull's crisis decision to set in motion a political process that will likely lead to a "double dissolution" of both houses of parliament, the CPSU is signaling its readiness, under conditions of immense political instability, to work with the Liberal-National Coalition government to end the dispute before the election.

The airport walkouts were due to be part of limited national industrial action that began on Monday, involving some 100,000 federal public sector workers in 13 different government departments, over stalled enterprise bargaining (contract) negotiations. Most public sector enterprise agreements expired two years ago. Over 130,000 employees, or almost 85 percent of the federal public service workforce, currently do not have work agreements. In effect, this has already meant a two-year wage freeze.

On Monday, public sector workers struck for 24 hours at Medicare, Centrelink, the Australian Tax Office, Defence, the Bureau of Meteorology, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Prime Minister's Department, Education, Environment, GeoScience Australia, IP Australia, the Australian Synchrotron and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

Civilian air traffic controllers and technical workers at the Department of Defence also walked out for the day. The next day, Immigration, Border Force and Agriculture staff held rolling stoppages at the Cairns, Townsville, Perth, Darwin and Adelaide airports. These strikes were supposed to be followed by three weeks of rolling partial industrial action by Department of Immigration workers, commencing on March 29.

The CPSU has spent the past two years blocking

unified action by federal public sector workers, while appealing to the Coalition government to recognise that the best way to achieve its cost-cutting demands is by collaborating with it. When Turnbull ousted his predecessor, former prime minister Tony Abbott, last September, the union pleaded with him for cooperation to achieve the government's agenda.

The government has offered annual pay rises of 2 percent—a cut in real wages compared to the actual increase in the cost of living for workers. And since any increase would not be backdated, it means the current wage freeze would apply for more than two years.

Moreover, any nominal wage rises would be conditional on the removal of hard-won working conditions. For example, the “offer” made by the Department of Human Services to its employees would end guaranteed rostered days off. Rostered staff could be directed to work any time between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., including split hours, with no requirement for management to “genuinely negotiate” employees’ working hours.

Performance monitoring would be intensified, job security undermined and family leave and other hard-won conditions reduced. Part-time and casual workers also face cuts in their take-home and overtime pay and working conditions.

Since it began negotiations in March 2014, the CPSU has reduced its original pay claim—down from 4 percent per year over three years to between 2.5 percent and 3 percent. Before this week’s stoppages, the union signalled that it was prepared to accept even lower increases. “This is not a dispute about pay: we are not far apart on money,” CPSU national secretary Flood told the media.

Flood called on Turnbull and Employment Minister Michaelia Cash to discuss “a more sensible bargaining policy” with the union and “fix this mess.” In other words, the CPSU will do whatever it can to dissipate the growing frustration of public sector workers. The “mess” to which Flood referred is the palpable hostility and resentment among union members and her concerns that the union could lose control of the situation.

Over the past decade, the CPSU has worked closely with both Labor and Liberal-National governments to axe over 16,500 positions and impose repeated “efficiency dividends”—a mechanism for slashing costs

and driving up workloads. While feigning opposition to some of these austerity measures, the union has fully embraced the underlying drive, which was enforced by the previous Labor government, to slash costs.

This offensive is set to intensify once the election is out of the way, whichever party or coalition forms the next government.



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