

Australia: State electricity workers vote for industrial action

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Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Professionals Australia (PA) members at Essential Energy, the state-owned New South Wales (NSW) electricity distribution company, have voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action this month in protest against management attacks on jobs and conditions. The current enterprise agreement expired last June.

The ballot was held as the company applied last month to the Fair Work Commission (FWC)—the federal industrial tribunal—for the termination of existing work agreements covering thousands of its employees. A full bench of the FWC will start hearing the case on June 14.

In the ballot, 94.8 percent of Essential Energy employees voted to strike for up to 72 hours. Over 96 percent of workers endorsed a range of industrial bans, including limitations on overtime, training, processing paperwork and use of a range of work essential technologies.

United Services Union (USU) members also voted for industrial action but the number involved was below the legally-required 50 percent participation rate. According to the USU, many of those eligible to vote did not receive a postal ballot. The union plans to apply for another ballot.

In line with the NSW Liberal government's drive to slash costs across the state's electricity distribution companies, Essential Energy wants a two-year wage freeze; the halving of payments to workers called in for emergencies; and the removal of requirements that contractors be paid appropriate wages and conditions. It is also seeking bans on redundant employees applying for other company jobs for two years, apart from casual positions.

In addition, management is demanding the elimination of "no-forced redundancy" clauses, which

would allow the immediate shedding of 800 jobs and unlimited numbers after June 2018. Last year, the company confirmed that it plans to axe nearly 1,400 jobs.

Essential Energy, which services regional and rural areas across NSW, is the only one of the three remaining state-owned electricity network companies that will, for now, remain in government hands.

Last July, the Baird government pushed enabling legislation through the NSW parliament to privatise Ausgrid and Endeavour Energy, which service major urban centres, and the high-voltage network company Transgrid. The government aims to raise \$30 billion.

Transgrid was sold last November for \$10.2 billion but \$3 billion of this was used to pay down the company's debt. Ausgrid and Endeavour are on track to be sold sometime later this year. There are only two bidders for Ausgrid, however, with predictions that it will not achieve its estimated sale price of \$10 billion plus.

In its statement to the FWC, Essential Energy declared that ending previous agreements and removing all "restraints, restrictions and inefficiencies" were necessary to reduce operating costs. This, the company claimed, would make the company "more efficient" and "contribute to sustainable long-term employment."

The vote by power workers for industrial action indicates their determination to defend jobs, wages and conditions. However, the unions, which have no fundamental differences with Essential Energy, have no intention of fighting the company attacks.

Essential Energy's cynical claim that job cuts will "contribute to sustainable long-term employment" is the same argument that the unions have repeatedly used to justify their complicity in imposing the costing cutting demands of government and big business.

Over the past decade, the power unions have systematically worked to contain and divert all opposition by workers to the privatisation of electricity assets and the axing of hundreds of jobs. While organising harmless protests to let off steam, they have sat down with management to negotiate the destruction of thousands of jobs through “voluntary” redundancies.

Last November Endeavour told the ETU and USU that another 255 jobs would be slashed by the end of year on top of the 115 jobs that had been already shed via voluntarily redundancies. In response, the unions merely “expressed concern that alternative options to maintain employment had not been explored.” The cuts represent nearly a fifth of the company’s workforce.

In the months leading up to the Essential Energy ballot, the unions insisted that the NSW government could be forced to change course if power workers appealed to rural and regional-based government MPs—that is, to those very forces involved in perpetrating the assault.

In a March 8 media release, ETU assistant secretary Neville Betts called for regional MPs “to urgently speak up in defence of local workers who are being stood-over and intimidated by management.”

Last year the unions issued the same appeals to crossbench MPs in the state parliament’s upper house, calling on them to block legislation enabling the privatisation of the distribution companies. After obtaining worthless “job security” assurances, the crossbench MPs dropped all pretence of opposition and voted for the sell-off.

During last year’s state elections, the unions told power workers to put their faith in the Labor Party’s bogus claim to oppose privatisation and job destruction in the state sector.

Two months after losing the election, NSW Labor leader Luke Foley endorsed the job cuts flagged by Networks NSW, which oversees the distribution companies. He declared his support for the distribution companies and for privatisation, declaring “private and not-for-profit sectors should play a significant role in the delivery of our public services.”

The prime concern of the power unions is that Essential Energy’s moves to tear up previous enterprise agreements will undermine company-union collaboration in the job destruction already underway at Ausgrid and Endeavour Energy.

By last September Ausgrid had already slashed 500 jobs across the extended Sydney metropolitan area, the Central Coast and Hunter Valley regions with another 500 positions slated for destruction.

If Essential Energy workers to want fight to defend jobs and conditions they have to make a break with the unions and their big-business program.

Rank-and-file committees should be established, independent of the unions, and a turn made to workers throughout the power industry and other sections of the working class—in steel, mining, the car industry and across manufacturing—all facing similar attacks.

What is required is a new political perspective based on the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies that places vital industries and utilities in public ownership and under the democratic control of the working class.

This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party and we urge all power workers to make contact, provide information of developments in your area, and open a discussion on the SEP’s perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact