Australian government uses “war on terror” to end airport strikes

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The fraudulent “war on terror”—utilised by both Coalition and Labor governments to justify Australia’s involvement in predatory US-led wars and attacks on domestic democratic rights—has been used to ban industrial action by workers fighting to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) industrial tribunal, following a weekend hearing, issued an interim injunction to stop scheduled national strikes at air and sea ports by Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) workers. It is the first time the federal government has invoked the threat of terrorism to outlaw industrial action by any section of the Australian workforce.

The DIBP rolling stoppages, which were due to begin on Monday, were part of limited national industrial action by about 100,000 federal public sector workers across 13 different government departments involved in a protracted dispute over new work agreements.

Most federal public sector enterprise agreements expired two years ago, leaving 130,000 employees, or almost 85 percent of the federal public service workforce, without work contracts or a pay rise. Public sector workers have overwhelmingly rejected government enterprise “offers” during this period. The offers involve nominal annual 2 percent wage rises, conditional on the elimination of various hard-won working conditions.

The government’s “urgent” application to the FWC was made under Section 424 of Australia’s draconian industrial relations laws. The FWC legislation was introduced by the former Rudd Labor government with the full support of the unions.

Section 424 allows the FWC, or the federal industrial relations minister, to terminate any industrial action deemed to “threaten to endanger the life, the personal safety or health or the welfare of the population or part of it.”

Supporting the government FWC application, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection Force issued a statement on April 4 claiming the existence of an “intolerable threat” to national security. It insisted that drug traffickers, child sex offenders, and “returning foreign fighters” could enter the country “undetected” as a result of any ongoing industrial action.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) immediately complied with the FWC interim order and directed DIBP workers to refrain from taking any action. It is the second time in less than two weeks that the CPSU has cancelled scheduled industrial action by DIBP staff in response to speculation about possible terror attacks.

Late last month, the union called off 24-hour stoppages at airports around the country following a request from Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. He made the appeal during a press conference after the terrorist bombings in Belgium.

The CPSU union seized on last week’s FWC injunction in the hope that it would demoralise other public sector workers and allow the union to resume negotiations and broker cost-cutting enterprise deals acceptable to the government.

From the outset, the CPSU has worked to limit the impact of any industrial action by DIBP staff, especially at airports and other key areas. In an April 2 media release, CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood admitted that the union had agreed to “more than 50 exemptions for officers whose work relates to counter-terrorism and security since this industrial action began almost a year ago.”

While federal public sector workers have shown their

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determination to defend their wages and conditions, the CPSU has done everything possible to prevent a political struggle against the government and its social austerity demands.

The CPSU's principal concern during the long-running dispute has been to convince the government that it can best achieve its ends through closer collaboration with the union. This is the content of CPSU secretary Nadine Flood's continuous appeals for the government to discuss "a more sensible bargaining policy" with the union and "fix this mess."

The shutdown of the scheduled DIBP strikes is another signal from the CPSU to the Liberal-National coalition government that it will do everything it can to resolve the enterprise agreement dispute before the federal election.

In her April 2 press release, Flood, voicing the entire union bureaucracy's support for the "war on terror," declared that the CPSU was "absolutely committed to the safety of our community and Australia's national security." Far from stopping terrorism, this US-led "war" has been used to unleash imperialist military aggression in the Middle East and internationally and unleash an assault on basic democratic rights.

The FWC interim injunction banning strike action by Immigration and Border Protection employees on "national security" grounds and its acceptance by the CPSU establishes a new anti-democratic precedent and one that will increasingly be used against workers in other key industries.

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