

Tens of thousands of Australian public sector workers set to strike

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Tens of thousands of federal public sector workers are set to strike on Friday, in opposition to ongoing moves by the Liberal-National Coalition government of Malcolm Turnbull to slash wages and conditions.

The widespread support for the action among public sector workers reveals an increasing militancy and desire to fight back against a decades-long assault on jobs and working conditions prosecuted by successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which covers the public sector, however, has limited the stoppage to 24 hours and is using it to promote the illusion that the government can be pressured into altering its course in enterprise bargaining negotiations. At the same time, the union is seeking to politically corral opposition behind the Labor Party, which has been one of the chief architects of the assault on the public sector.

Workers participating in Friday's strike action include employees of Centrelink, Medicare, the Tax Office, Child Support Defence, the Bureau of Meteorology, Agriculture and Water Resources, and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. CPSU airport workers are also expected to take limited industrial action, with warnings from the government of delays.

The strikers are among around 100,000 public servants who have opposed regressive Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBA) put forward by the Liberal-National governments over the past two-and-a-half years.

As a consequence of the delayed agreements, the bulk of the CPSU's members in the federal public sector have not had a pay rise in over two years. The government has stated that any agreements will not be back-dated which means that CPSU members have effectively been locked into a pay freeze since 2013. Cost-cutting agreements covering another 50,000 workers have been pushed through. Agreements covering some 20,000 workers over four departments have been imposed since the July 2

federal election.

Over the course of the protracted dispute, the union has reduced its pay claim from a 4 percent increase over four years, to between 2.5 and 3 percent. The government has offered nominal pay increases of 2 percent per year, which it has stated will be tied to "productivity" measures aimed at slashing costs.

Workers have resoundingly rejected deals put forward by a number of departments. Employees in the Department of Immigration rejected an offer of a 3.4 percent over three years last September, with 91 percent voting against. Some 81 percent voted down a 6 percent offer over three years in March. The same month, 71 percent of the Australian Communication and Media Authority's workers voted down an annual 2 percent pay rise. In May, 71 percent of employees rejected the latest offer put forward by the Australian Tax Office. In most departments, workers have voted against two or three concession EBAs.

The ballot results express widespread anger over the intensified assault on public sector jobs and conditions. In its May budget, the Liberal-National government committed to almost \$2 billion in cuts to the public sector in the form of "efficiency dividends" over the next four years.

The government is conducting reviews into a host of departments, and foreshadowed the destruction of up to 250 smaller public sector bodies. At the same time, job cuts are being extended, with 810 sackings slated in the Department of Human Resources, 300 at the Immigration Department and 344 in Social Services. The union has warned that up to 800 more additional jobs may be destroyed in immigration.

The government's offer for Department of Immigration workers included the abolition of multiple allowances, which could see some workers up to \$8,000 worse off annually, along with the scrapping of flexible working

hours.

The CPSU has played the central role in preventing the development of a unified struggle against the cuts. Throughout the wage dispute, the union has stressed its willingness to “negotiate” a “reasonable outcome.”

The union has repeatedly appealed to the government to utilise its services to impose new agreements, which would inevitably entail further cost-cutting.

In comments last month, CPSU national president Alistair Waters denounced the government’s “unworkable approach to public sector bargaining” and declared that Michaelia Cash, the employment minister, had “tried to undermine our attempts to help her fix the Turnbull government’s bargaining mess.” Nadine Flood, the union’s national secretary, reiterated in comments published yesterday that the CPSU is appealing for the government to “engage with us on a sensible alternative.”

The CPSU’s role in isolating employees in each department, and limiting industrial action to partial strikes, has been aimed at wearing-down and dissipating opposition.

In March, the union cancelled a strike of airport workers after an appeal from Malcolm Turnbull which included vague references to “terror threats,” establishing a precedent that can be used against other industrial and political actions. The following month, the union acceded to a ruling by the Fair Work Commission, banning industrial action by Border Force workers on the grounds of “national security.”

This has played directly into the hands of the government. On Wednesday, Fairfax Media reported new moves to force through EBAs and stated, “some departmental secretaries and agency chief executives now see an opportunity to capitalise on weariness among their employees with the protracted stoush.”

The union has advanced the lie that the Labor Party will reverse the assault on the public sector. Featured speakers at a strike event in Brisbane will include former Labor treasurer Wayne Swan and other prominent Labor Party figures.

The union campaigned for Labor in the 2016 federal elections and promoted its fraudulent populist posturing, including claims that it would wind back “efficiency dividends” which have been the chief mechanism for decades of cutbacks. One union statement, for instance, was headlined, “Community wins, consultants lose with Labor ‘efficiency’ dividend policy.” In reality, Labor merely committed to a 2017 review into dividends and refused to specify whether it was proposing their

abolition.

It was the Labor government of Bob Hawke that introduced “efficiency dividends” in 1987. The measure—an annual funding reduction for government agencies—has been the basis for an unending assault on jobs, wages and conditions across the public sector.

Prior to the 2007 election, then Labor leader Kevin Rudd declared that his government would take a “meat axe” to the public service. The Labor governments of Rudd and Julia Gillard proceeded to destroy as many as 14,500 public sector jobs between 2007 and 2013, repeatedly increasing the “efficiency dividend.” In 2013, the Rudd government boosted the dividend from 1.25 percent to 2.25 percent laying the basis for cuts subsequently enforced by the Abbott Coalition government.

The attack on the public sector is part of a broader offensive against the entire working class, amid relentless demands by the corporate and financial elite for austerity measures in line with the social counter-revolution being imposed in Europe and the United States. During the election campaign, Labor pledged to make some \$33 billion in cuts, including to healthcare, education and welfare. Since the formation of a Liberal-National government, Labor has stressed its “bipartisan commitment” to so-called “budget repair”—a code-word for slashing spending.

At the same time, the slowdown of the Australian economy is being used to overhaul working conditions across the board, and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The only way forward for public sector workers is to break out of the shackles imposed by the CPSU, and begin an independent political struggle in defence of all jobs, wages and conditions. Workers should establish rank-and-file committees as centres of an industrial and political fight aimed at uniting public sector employees throughout all departments and with other sections of the working class.

Above all, what is required is a socialist perspective and the fight for a workers’ government, which would end the subordination of social need, including to a decent, well-paying job, to the dictates of the capitalist market.



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