

Australian public sector union holds farcical protests amid one-day strike

Our reporters
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On Friday, thousands of federal public sector workers participated in a 24-hour strike called by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). The industrial action was part of an ongoing dispute over wages and conditions that has left 100,000 public sector workers without an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, or wage rise, for almost three years.

Despite calling the strike, the union did everything it could to prevent a broader mobilisation of public sector workers, and any discussion of the political issues they confront. It held a series of small protests outside the offices of Liberal-National MPs, which were limited to grovelling appeals for the government to initiate bargaining negotiations with the union and attempts to present the Labor Party as an alternative.

In New South Wales, the country's most populous state, the union held a single protest outside Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's office in Sydney. The event was attended by as few as 50 people, many of them officials and staff members of the union. There were no speeches. Instead, the union officials posed for media photos, and led chants such as "come on Malcolm, come on," and calls for the government to "end this bargaining mess."

Protests of a similar size and character were held in capital cities across the country. In Queensland, the union held a forum with prominent Labor MPs, including Wayne Swan, providing them with a platform to posture as opponents of the Coalition government's cuts to the public sector.

As treasurer in the Labor government of Kevin Rudd, Swan oversaw the introduction of an additional 2 percent "efficiency dividend" in 2008 on top of the 1.25 percent maintained during the previous Liberal-National government. "Efficiency dividends" are an annual funding reduction to the public sector, that have been the basis for the gutting of jobs and working conditions over the past three decades. That increase, and the ensuing measures by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments led to the destruction of up to 14,500 federal public sector jobs.

The actions of the Liberal-National government are a continuation of these bipartisan policies. In addition to

imposing an annual 2 percent cap on pay rises in enterprise agreements, the government is spearheading the elimination of a host of longstanding working conditions.

The latest agreement presented to workers at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), for instance, reportedly aims to remove protections against outsourcing and casualisation. It also abolishes clauses mandating consultation with staff and the union prior to workplace changes, cuts the rights of workers who are made redundant, limits access to miscellaneous leave and imposes a non-negotiable "Annual Performance Increase."

Workers have voted down similar agreements by large majorities in the Australian Communication and Media Authority, the Australian Tax Office, the Department of Immigration, and in other areas of the public sector.

The union, which has repeatedly made clear that it is not opposed to the government demands, is fearful that the overhaul of existing workplace arrangements threatens its own role in bargaining away the jobs and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

On Friday morning, CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood declared that the government had "ridiculously claimed the CPSU is standing in the way of a resolution but history shows the opposite." Flood stated that, "This union has successfully finalised deals for more than two decades with prime ministers of all shapes, from Bob Hawke to John Howard."

The references to Hawke and Howard were another signal that the union is prepared to impose deep cuts on public sector workers. It was the Hawke Labor government that first introduced "efficiency dividends," which have been one of the central mechanisms for the destruction of 40 percent of public sector jobs since 1983. The Howard Liberal-National government oversaw the destruction of almost 30,000 public sector jobs in its first three years of office from 1996–99.

Flood went on to call for the government to "follow the lead set by successful major employers by treating their

workers with respect and offering them a fair and reasonable deal.” Her comment was a veiled reference to the close collaboration between unions and the corporate elite in pushing through sweeping attacks on working conditions.

The unions have played the decisive role in assisting in the shutdown of the car industry by the end of 2017, having overseen the decimation of hundreds of thousands of industrial jobs. At BlueScope Steel, the Australian Workers Union pushed through a three-year wage freeze last October, in a move hailed by the *Australian Financial Review* as “groundbreaking.” Across the retail, hospitality and cleaning sectors, unions have struck secret deals with major corporations stripping the lowest-paid workers of millions of dollars in wages.

The government responded to the CPSU’s 24-hour walkout by indicating that it will press ahead with its assault on public sector workers, with Employment Minister Michaela Cash denouncing the strike as “absurd.” An article in the *Sunday Telegraph* yesterday spelled out the agenda of the financial elite, declaring that “taxpayers are being forced to shell out” for the conditions of workers in the public sector.

Friday’s pathetic protests and the union’s entreaties to the government underscore the need for workers to strike out on a new path, including through the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees to prosecute an industrial and political counter-offensive against the government’s attacks.

The WSWs spoke to several workers who attended Friday’s protest in Sydney.

Steve from the Bureau of Meteorology said: “Our agreement expired in 2014 and so we’ve been stuck in a three-year pay freeze. Even if we get a new EBA we’ve been told there will no back pay. This means a real wage cut. At the same we’re being told that we have to give back working conditions, lower rates, worse working hours and cuts in redundancy payments.

“About 70 percent of the membership at the Bureau of Meteorology have consistently rejected the enterprise agreement [EBA] offers from the department and the government. They won’t accept the department’s enterprise offer because they know it’s just not fair.”

David from the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR) said: “All we’re doing is fighting for a reasonable wage and to protect our conditions. The government says it has no money but they magically found \$800 million to purchase two US ships for the navy and they’re going to spend even more in the future. There’s no money for education and for health but always plenty for the military.

“The purchasing power of our wages diminishes the longer

this dispute goes on but I’m going to dig in my heels and make sure that everybody I know—even my non-union friends work—to keep rejecting the management offers.

“I’m a lifer—I’ve worked in the public service since I left university in 1998—but there’s been significant changes to our conditions during this time. I’ve seen conditions deteriorate in every sector of the workforce—teachers, nurses—everyone is being hit. Labor introduced the annual efficiency dividend and it’s getting worse every year with more staff cuts. If the current enterprise offer gets through management will demand more and more and we’ll have no say.

“I’m an imports officer and now have to work in exports. This means my previous area of expertise has to be put aside so I can cover employment shortfalls in exports. We’re being spread too thinly and it’s crazy. They’re trying to get blood out of stone.

“Management cuts jobs and then hires the same people as casuals. Part-timers are being asked to work longer hours instead of employing the right numbers of staff. It’s ridiculous and it’s not about saving money.”

Jac, from the Department of Human Services (DHS), told the WSWs: “I’ve voted against all the previous offers because they attack our conditions and yet the heads of departments refuse to conduct any serious negotiations. We’re taken for granted and just not appreciated by the department and the government.

“I’ve worked at DHS for four years and every year we’re being asked to work harder and for longer hours. There’s no discussion or negotiations. Six months ago our work target was unilaterally increased. There’s a lot of unhappiness, anger and frustration in the workplace. People keep voting against the offers but I think we need more action because the government is just not listening.”



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