

Australia: Immigration employees take industrial action in public sector dispute

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30 September 2016

Workers from the Department of Immigration and Border Force (DIBF) launched limited industrial action on Monday, as part of an ongoing dispute over federal public sector wages and conditions.

As many as 100,000 federal public sector workers in departments covered by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) have gone almost three years without an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

The dispute centres on the government's demands for a sweeping overhaul of working conditions, aimed at slashing costs, and capped wage increases below the rate of inflation, which will result in real wage cuts for many employees. Because the government has asserted that any agreement will not be backdated, the conflict has resulted in most of the CPSU's public sector members being hit with an effective three-year wage freeze.

While there is widespread opposition to the government's attacks among workers, the CPSU has done everything it can to prevent the development of an industrial and political fight against the measures. Instead the union has issued pathetic appeals to the government for negotiations, and has promoted illusions that a Labor Party government would be an alternative.

The current strike action is along these lines. It involves rolling stoppages of just 30 minutes at cruise ship terminals, cargo facilities and international airports. The union has stated that the action will continue until October 9. It has not provided any details on when and where members will go on strike.

Despite the limited character of the stoppages, a series of commentaries in the financial press have declared that the action is likely to lead to delays at international airports.

A statement by the Department of Immigration and

Border Protection likewise commented: "This proposed strike action flies in the face of this bargaining process and represents an unreasonable and unwarranted escalation at a time the department is looking to find consensus."

Federal Liberal-National senator and former minister for industrial relations Eric Abetz also denounced the stoppage and said that the union was being "unrealistic."

Some prominent figures have called for the government to step-in and ban the strike altogether.

On Wednesday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a comment by Dr John Moyne of the Australian Strategic and Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-connected think tank, which denounced the industrial action as "an unacceptable risk to airport security during the school holidays." Moyne encouraged the government to make legislative changes to the employment conditions of Border Force workers, in order to prevent them from taking any industrial action.

"National security" has previously been invoked by the government, and the union, to suppress strike action by Border Force employees.

In March, the CPSU cancelled scheduled 24-hour strikes after the Liberal-National government issued vague terrorism warnings in the wake of attacks at Brussels airport in Belgium. The union's move created a dangerous precedent for any industrial or political struggle to be suppressed at the say-so of the government. In April, an injunction by the government's Fair Work Commission banned strike action by Border Force employees on the grounds of "national security."

According to the *Australian*, in the latest dispute the union has 50 exemptions in place "to ensure national

security and the safety of the general public.” The union has nevertheless accused the department of “strike breaking.” It has alleged that the department is engaging in “surge deployment,” whereby employees are transferred in order to cover the work of their striking colleagues.

The strike action follows a new offer from the department, reported on by the CPSU at the beginning of the month. According to the union, the new deal retains cuts to working conditions contained in previous offers, and reduces average pay raises contained in the last proposed agreement from an average of 6 percent over three years, to just 4.7 percent. The CPSU has claimed that under the offer, some staff would face real cuts to take-home pay.

Repeated government offers have included clauses to strip allowances, which in some cases could leave workers \$8,000 worse off per year. The government is also seeking to abolish existing workplace entitlements and allowances, including for flexible working hours.

Workers also face the prospect of the reinstatement of a host of cuts to pay and conditions first implemented in July 2015 when the government merged Australian Customs, Border Protection Service and the Department of Immigration to form the DIBF. The union has claimed that as many as 800 jobs are set to be slashed across the department.

As in a number of other public sector departments, DIBF staff have repeatedly voted down government offers in large numbers. An agreement in September 2015 was rejected by 91 percent of employees and a similar offer in May 2016 was voted down by 81 percent of workers.

There are indications, however, of mounting frustration and hostility among workers towards the CPSU’s attempts to limit opposition to isolated strikes and protests. A one-day strike called by the union on September 9 across a number of departments appears to have been boycotted by a substantial number of workers, including in departments that have overwhelmingly rejected government offers.

On the day of the strike, the union held pathetic protests outside the offices of Liberal-National MPs. The events, which were attended in most capital cities by as few as 50 union officials and workers, were aimed at suppressing any serious political discussion. There were no speeches, with union officials merely

posing for media photos and leading chants of “Come on Malcolm, come on,” directed to the conservative prime minister.

According to John Lloyd, the Public Service Commissioner, only 730 Tax Office workers took part in the strike action, out of a workforce of almost 20,000. Lloyd claimed that 5,000 Department of Human Services employees participated in the stoppage, out of over 34,000 employees, and that none of its offices were closed.

In the Department of the Environment and Energy only 36 of 2,400 participated and in the Department of Parliamentary Services just 27 out of 894 employees took part. Among Immigration and Border Force workers, the participation was reportedly 4 percent.

The union has continued to signal that it is willing to work with the government to slash the conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent. CPSU national secretary, Nadine Flood stated at the beginning of the latest strike that “In our view, the best way to avert this protected industrial action would be for the government to choose to either seek a sensible resolution through discussions or to take the CPSU to the Fair Work Commission and allow the independent umpire to [resolve] the matter.”

At the same time, the union is campaigning for Labor Party candidates in the Australian Capital Territory elections, and is presenting them as “pro-public sector.” In reality, it was the Labor government of Bob Hawke that introduced efficiency dividends, mandating an annual funding cut to the public sector, in the late 1980s. The measure has been used by successive governments to decimate the jobs and conditions of public sector workers, including by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, which presided over the destruction of up to 14,500 federal public sector jobs.



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