

Australian union's bogus campaign against penalty rate cut

Our reporters
11 March 2017

Thousands of workers joined protests across Australia on Thursday, opposing cuts to weekend penalty wages and the reintroduction of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) by the Turnbull Liberal-National government.

Up to 15,000 construction workers, nurses, electricians and other workers, participated in the Melbourne rally. Around 10,000 attended in Sydney. Several thousand took part in Brisbane, and smaller events were held in other cities.

Workers denounced the ABCC, which is tasked with slashing working conditions and suppressing industrial action in the construction industry, and the Fair Work Commission's ruling last month cutting Sunday and public holiday penalty wage rates for retail, hospitality, pharmacy and fast food workers.

However, the rally organisers, including the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), called the events to launch a campaign for the return of a federal Labor government, which would be committed to the dictates of the corporate elite.

Union officials invoked the campaign they conducted in 2006–07 to channel intense working class opposition to the Howard government's so-called WorkChoices laws behind the election of a Labor government. Labor then introduced no less repressive "Fair Work" laws that the unions supported and used to suppress industrial action.

In Sydney, union officials read a message from New South Wales Labor leader Luke Foley, which whitewashed the record of state and federal Labor governments. He declared that the assault on workers' wages and conditions was merely a product of the "bizarre and primitive way" that Liberal-National politicians "view the world."

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

president Ged Kearney followed suit, denouncing "laws that allow the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to cut the pay of the lowest-paid people in this country." She declared: "We have laws that have allowed this government to come after hard-working people."

Kearney did not mention that it was the Labor government of Kevin Rudd, backed by the unions, which established the FWC and gave it powers to ban strikes, and enforce cuts to wages and conditions.

Kearney claimed that the unions would "fight to increase the number of decent jobs." She declared: "No more casualisation." For decades, the ACTU has overseen countless union-company deals slashing full-time jobs, with the result that casual and contract employees make up almost half the workforce.

Likewise, CFMEU national secretary Dave Noonan denounced the ABCC, but was silent on the fact that the last Labor government maintained it until 2012 and then replaced it with the Fair Work Building Industry Inspectorate, which retained virtually all of the ABCC's punitive powers.

Noonan warned that the ABCC's construction code would "intimidate workers out of the unions and having collective rights." The union is primarily worried that the Turnbull government's legislation threatens its role in bargaining away workers' conditions.

The CFMEU did not campaign against Labor's Fair Work Building Industry Inspectorate because it protected negotiating rights for the union, which enable it to function as an industrial police force for the employers. This role was graphically demonstrated the week before the protests, when the CFMEU pushed through a 5 percent pay cut for up to 900 workers at the Maryvale paper mill in Victoria (see: "Australian union pushes through pay cut at paper mill").

Noonan and other speakers invoked the tragic death

of Tim Macpherson, a worker killed in an industrial accident at Sydney's Barangaroo Ferry Hub site on March 1.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) claimed it had warned last year that the site did not comply with safety standards. However, the union did nothing to prevent work from going ahead, and did not publicly expose the breaches. In reality, the unions enforce productivity speed-ups and oversee lax health and safety that contribute to accidents in construction and related industries.

Noonan concluded by making it plain that the unions are trying to restore a Labor government. "This movement will continue until we see the back of [Prime Minister] Malcolm Turnbull, or whoever they put in to replace him," he said.

This perspective was on full display at the Melbourne rally. Labor's federal assistant shadow minister for workplace relations, Lisa Chesters, was the keynote speaker, posturing as an opponent of the penalty rates cut. All the speakers covered-up the fact that current Labor leader Bill Shorten, a key minister in the 2007–13 Labor government, included penalty rates in a list of award entitlements to be reviewed, i.e., cut by the FWC.

While union officials feigned outrage at the slashing of penalty rates, the unions have already established a host of agreements with employers, including in the hospitality, retail and fast food sectors, which reduced or eliminated penalty rates for low-paid workers.

Shorten, as national secretary of the Australian Workers Union, was involved in deals cutting wages for cleaners, and other low-paid workers, saving employers hundreds of millions of dollars.

WSWS reporters spoke to some protesters at the rallies.

In Melbourne, construction worker **Ben** said he was attending his first protest. "The Fair Work Commission just keeps screwing us," he said. "I've got a sister who works in hospitality, she has to work two jobs. She is going to lose the penalty rates from both her jobs—\$90 and \$130 will make a big difference to her wages."

Taokotai, a steel fixer in Sydney, said he was directly affected by a drive by major corporations to eliminate enterprise bargaining agreements, in order to drastically reduce wages. "I have worked at my current company for so long, and now they're trying to cut our

pay," he said.

"I'm so angry I can hardly speak about it. Our main concern is that they're trying to cut our overtime and our hourly flat rate. They're doing it all over New South Wales and Victoria, and in Brisbane as well. I calculated that I could lose a quarter of my wages if this happened."

Eric said he had been a construction worker for five years. "In that time it's changed a lot, it has declined. Conditions are being stripped back. We work hard enough, we do long hours and we've got families to feed and look after. They shouldn't be cutting our pay or conditions. We're working in an industry where it's hard work, we've got tight time-lines."

John, who recently became a nurse, after working as a chef for a decade, commented: "Part of the reason I left the hospitality industry was to get a job where we have decent working conditions, and I don't have to see them go."

John said company-union wage-cutting deals were "appalling," adding "the companies aren't paying penalty rates anyhow." He explained: "I worked for ten years in hospitality and not once was I paid the penalty rates that are due on a Sunday."

"You either take what the employers choose to pay you or you don't get the job. You work hours and hours of overtime and if you demand penalty rates, they'll just bring in someone else who will do the job for half the price cash in hand."



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