

Australian city council locks out electricians for imposing work bans

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3 June 2017

Brisbane City Council this week locked out 25 of its 30 electricians after they took limited industrial action to fight new rosters that would place them permanently on call.

For one day, the workers had imposed bans on paper work and “minor” tasks to oppose the council’s “flexible rostering” proposal, which would allow the council to force workers onto after-hours shifts. An email from council’s workplace relations manager said workers who took the action would not be required for work on Monday.

Employing about 7,500 workers altogether, the council covers most of the metropolitan area of the Queensland state capital. Its aggressive action underscores the determination of governments and employers across the country to dismantle workers’ conditions, slash wage levels and replace permanent workers with contractors.

The electricians service traffic signals, street lighting and other council facilities. The proposed roster system would end their right to choose whether to be available for night, weekend or on-call shifts. It would force some onto permanent night shifts and include weekends in the standard working week.

If workers refused to work at any time, including at night or on weekends, they could be sacked or disciplined and the work could be contracted out.

The electricians adopted the work bans as enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) talks between the council and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which began last October, dragged on, leaving them without a pay rise for five years. The council is also demanding cuts to sick and domestic violence leave entitlements.

James Careedy, one of the locked-out workers, told the WSWs that the council was “taking a hard line” on the rostering issue, and would not “listen to reason.”

He explained: “For a lot of people here we have families, kids and we have things to do on weekends, just like other members of the public.”

The council would ask workers to “show just cause” for declining to work on weekends. Even if a worker had to take kids to a soccer match, the council could “review” that consideration and still order the worker onto the roster. “It becomes like a dictatorship. ‘You will work that roster, that’s it.’ So they come down with a hard hammer.”

Careedy said the council was also attacking other sections of its workforce. Its EBA demands were seeking to chop the civil construction workers from full penalty wage rates for night work down to time and 30 percent.

ETU organiser Brenton Muller denounced the council for escalating the dispute instead of trying to resolve it with the union’s help. He told the media the council’s conduct, during “these negotiations” was “reprehensible.”

Muller appealed to Brisbane Lord Mayor Graham Quirk, a leading member of the conservative Liberal National Party, to “pull council management into line and allow these electricians to return to work.”

Together with other unions covering council workers, including the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the ETU is keeping the electricians isolated, refusing to call out other workers to defend them. AMWU state secretary Rohan Webb said his union was working toward having its members take “protected industrial action” under the federal Fair Work laws, a process that could take weeks.

Muller indicated the ETU’s willingness to assist the council to achieve its “flexibility,” saying: “These electricians are already flexible and work when they are needed to, but council is trying to pass a condition that

they can dictate when they have to work 24/7 with zero consultation.”

Speaking to a WSWS correspondent, Muller went further, saying he had asked the council’s negotiation team to show “where they can’t get jobs done so we may be able to assist in getting those job done.”

Asked if the council’s 7,500 other workers would be brought in to support the locked-out electricians, Muller said the unions must wait to apply to take legally-protected industrial action. This typifies the unions’ enforcement of the Fair Work legislation, imposed by the previous federal Labor government, which outlaws industrial action except during authorised EBA bargaining periods.

To create the impression of at least some state Labor government support for the electricians, State Development Minister Anthony Lynham joined them outside the Kedron depot in his electorate on Monday morning. But the Labor Party has its own long record of contracting out work, or totally privatising government services.

By going on the offensive, the council is trying to exploit the fact that Queensland, once a “mining boom” state, is now facing a collapse in apartment construction, adding to the pressure on workers’ wages and conditions.

More fundamentally, for decades, the trade unions have helped successive state and federal Labor and Liberal-National governments impose economic and social restructuring in the interests of business “international competitiveness” and profitability.



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