

# Australian unions help impose cuts to federal pay and conditions

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With the assistance of the public service unions, the fragile Liberal-National government has finally imposed new enterprise agreements (EAs) that cut pay and erode working conditions in five major federal departments.

During recent weeks, agreements have been struck at several agencies where workers previously rejected government “offers” by decisive margins. These include the Australian Tax Office (ATO), the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Staff, the Department of Defence, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR).

Throughout a three-year dispute over new agreements, the unions have kept workers divided department-by-department and confine them to limited stoppages and protests. They have subjected their members to ballot after ballot on offers that remain the same or contain inconsequential changes.

The unions’ aim was to wear down workers’ resistance and retain their own position at the negotiating table. The Community Public Sector Union (CPSU) and other unions repeatedly appealed to the Coalition government to “see sense” and utilise the unions’ services to continue decades of cost-cutting.

Few details of the deals at the five agencies have been made public, but it is clear they will deepen the cuts to jobs and conditions that have resulted in increased workloads and speed-ups across the public service.

All five agreements are based on the government’s “bargaining policy,” including its 2 percent annual pay ceiling, designed to keep wage increases below the inflation rate. The EAs will not be backdated to the expiry of the previous agreements in 2013. Thus, they

will formalise what has been a wage freeze of more than three years that has saved the government millions of dollars.

In the lead-up to the recent ballots, the unions isolated workers at different departments, preventing a unified industrial and political struggle against the unstable Turnbull government.

At some departments, including the CSIRO and the Department of Defence, the CPSU posted pro-forma web site statements suggesting a “no vote.” At other agencies, including the ATO, the union made no recommendation, while claiming the offer was better than the government’s previous ones. At the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Staff, the CPSU called for a “yes” vote.

Asked by the WSWs what the union had advocated at the CSIRO and elsewhere, CPSU media representative Simon Frazer said the union proposed a “softer no.” He said: “We provided our members with the details so they could make up their own minds.”

In other words, the union sought to ensure the passage of the agreements, while distancing itself from the regressive measures.

At a number of the departments, a substantial minority of workers nevertheless voted “no.” In Defence, 39 percent voted to reject the agreement, with 84 percent of eligible staff participating.

At the CSIRO, where last October staff voted 70 percent against a government offer, the latest agreement got through by just 57.74 percent. Some 77 percent of eligible staff voted.

At DAWR, where workers rejected four previous offers, the latest was accepted by 63 percent.

Finally, at the end of June, 16,600 workers at the ATO voted 83 percent to accept the union-negotiated agreement. No doubt the union-engineered collapse of

resistance at the other agencies impacted on the resolve of the ATO workers, who had overwhelmingly rejected five earlier government offers.

Hailing the agreement last Wednesday, Commissioner of Taxation Chris Jordan declared the deal a “really positive” outcome for the ATO and praised the “collaborative approach” taken by “unions and workplace bargaining representatives.”

CPSU representatives cynically declared that the deals at the CSIRO, Defence and DAWR were “not perfect” and eroded conditions. Yet CPSU deputy national secretary Melissa Donnelly welcomed the outcome, declaring: “This bitter and protracted round of public sector bargaining may finally be headed towards a resolution.”

Donnelly made these comments despite Federal Court employees this week rejecting by 90 percent an agreement that would have capped wage increases at just 1 percent, and meant increased workloads and cuts to conditions.

The latest cost-cutting agreements come on top of 100 deals imposed across other government departments since union bargaining began. Having broken resistance at key agencies, the unions will use similar methods to try to deliver the government similar outcomes across the entire public sector.

The CPSU has already moved to neuter opposition by Department of Immigration employees, who have consistently rejected government offers abolishing multiple allowances and containing other severe cuts.

Last year these workers conducted a series of industrial stoppages that impacted on the operation of ports and airports, before the stoppages were limited by the CPSU and then called off. The union then pushed the dispute into the Fair Work industrial tribunal where an arbitrated outcome will no doubt deliver the government’s agenda.

Also in the unions’ crosshairs are the 34,000 workers at the Department of Human Services (DHS) who have overwhelmingly rejected three government offers.

In a ploy to soften up DHS workers, the CPSU claimed on June 28 it had won around 2,000 new jobs for the department. In reality, most of the “new” positions will be filled by current casual staff, so there will be no overall increase in employment levels. The so-called increase will not compensate for thousands of jobs already axed across the department or the 1,200

earmarked for shedding in the May budget.

Nor does the deal represent any drive by the unions to fight the ongoing casualisation in the public service, a process that the unions have overseen for decades.

Having stymied workers’ attempts to fight the Turnbull government’s assault, the unions are looking to steer the mounting discontent behind the election of another Labor government. In a June bulletin, the CPSU declared there was no way to change the government’s policy, so “the alternative is to wait for the next federal election and see if a new government improves on the current policy.”

However, during last year’s federal election campaign, Labor pledged to make some \$33 billion in cuts, including to healthcare, education and welfare. Since the narrow return of the Liberal-National government, Labor has stressed its “bipartisan commitment” to “budget repair”—a code-word for slashing spending and thus jobs.



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