

# Australia: Over 150,000 workers protest against assault on wages and conditions

Our reporters

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More than 150,000 workers protested yesterday in Melbourne, Victoria's state capital, in opposition to the corporate-government offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions. Over 10,000 took part in a Sydney rally. A smaller event was held in Perth and protests will take place in other capital cities over the coming weeks.

The attendance at the Melbourne demonstration, which was one of the largest in the past ten years, expressed a growing desire by workers to fight back, after a decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions. There is immense anger over stagnant and declining wages, the soaring cost of living, and the gutting of jobs and conditions across every sector of industry, along with deep-going hostility to the official parliamentary parties.

However, the aim of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which called the protests, is to channel these sentiments behind the election of yet another federal Labor government, committed to the dictates of the corporate elite of sweeping attacks on the working class.

The rallies were part of the ACTU's "Change the Rules" campaign. None of the union speakers at the protests mentioned that the "rules" they claim to be opposing—draconian Fair Work Australia industrial legislation—were introduced by the last federal Labor government, with the full support of the ACTU and its affiliates.

Since then, Labor and the unions have invoked these repressive laws to prevent any political or industrial struggle by workers and to enforce the demands of big business.

At the Melbourne rally, thousands of construction workers, port employees and public servants gathered en masse before marching through the city's central business district.

Contingents of workers came from Melbourne's working class outer suburbs and from regional centres. Employees at Endeavour Ceilings in Dandenong, an outer

suburb 35 kilometres from the city centre, came as a group. There were also two busloads of highly exploited migrant workers from Robinvale, near the state border with New South Wales, who work on grape farms under onerous conditions enforced by labour contractors.

The real purpose of the unions' campaign was on show as Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews lined up at the front of the march with ACTU secretary Sally McManus and Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Luke Hilakari. The union officials did everything they could to promote Andrews and the Labor government, declaring that the premier had "earned the right to march with us."

Troy Grey, state secretary of the Electrical Trades Union, said that if Andrews won the November Victorian election, his government would resolve social inequality and abolish "trickle down economics." "Every state needs a premier like Daniel Andrews," Grey declared.

Karen Batt, Victorian secretary of the Public Services Union, touted Labor's close collaboration with the unions, hailing as a "record" the "58 enterprise agreements" struck between the Victorian government and unions officials over the past four years, all of which have maintained stagnant wages, and understaffing across the public sector. Batt declared: "Return the Labor government, then turn our eyes to Canberra!"

The open promotion of Andrews underscores the anti-working class character of the entire "Change the Rules" campaign.

The Victorian Labor government has starved hospitals and schools of funds, while providing the major corporations with significant tax breaks. It has used Fair Work legislation to ban strikes by power workers in the Latrobe Valley and other sections of workers (see: "Australia: Victorian Labor government makes election pitch to big business")

Well aware of the widespread hostility to this record in

the working class, unions officials did not ask Andrews to speak. ACTU secretary McManus did not mention the premier in her speech to the rally. She told a delegates meeting last month, however, that Andrews was “the best boss ever.”

The backing for the Victorian Labor government demonstrates that the unions would also collaborate with a federal Labor government, as it attacked living standards and democratic rights at home and supported US-led wars abroad.

The speakers in Sydney made this plain, declaring that their aim was to oust the federal Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison and install Labor.

The line was most crudely summed up by Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union state secretary Darren Greenfield, who declared: “We’re here to change the government and change these laws that these bastards have brought in against us all over the last six or eight years. We’re ready to get rid of these bastards. They’re on their knees, they’re a rabble of a government and we’re ready to see them out.”

Greenfield’s vague and inaccurate reference to the laws of “the last six or eight years” was not accidental. It was part of a broader attempt to cover-up the fact that the legislation being used to illegalise strikes and slash workers’ conditions was introduced in 2009 by Labor.

ACTU president Michele O’Neill reviewed the growth of casualisation, record low wage growth, mounting poverty and unprecedented social inequality, all of which she declared was a result of the Liberal-National government.

In reality, everything that O’Neill referred to is a product of the decades-long collaboration of the unions with governments and the employers against the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The ACTU spearheaded the Accords with big business and the Hawke federal Labor government in the 1980s, clearing the way for the deregulation of the economy and the gutting of hundreds of thousands of jobs. It oversaw the introduction of enterprise bargaining, which the unions have used to impose one regressive agreement after another over the past two decades.

O’Neill was clearly fearful of widespread hostility to Labor among workers. “We are going to change the rules and we are going to change this government,” she stated, before adding, “It’s not just about electing a Labor government, it’s about winning a change in fairness.”

This disclaimer was so much hot air. The entire record of the unions demonstrates that they will do everything

they can to enforce the pro-business agenda of a federal Labor government.

Other speakers also sought to demagogically appeal to increasingly oppositional and anti-capitalist sentiment. Maritime Union of Australia state secretary Warren Smith denounced “capitalists” who were “bathing in rivers of gold.” “We’re here to take them rivers of gold back for working people,” Smith exclaimed.

The MUA has enforced the destruction of thousands of jobs in the maritime industry over the past two decades, and has backed every speedup and automation measure to ensure the profitability of the giant stevedoring companies.

At each of the protests, Labor, Greens and pseudo-left contingents mobilised to support their allies in the union bureaucracy. The pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, called for workers to sign petitions demanding that Labor pledge it will “change the rules.” In other words, they were promoting the fraudulent claim that one of the main parties of big business could be pressured to advance the interests of the working class.

Socialist Equality Party campaigners were alone in exposing the bogus character of the ACTU campaign. They spoke to workers about the need for a break with Labor and the unions, for the creation of new organisations of struggle, including independent factory committees, and for a socialist perspective, aimed at establishing a workers’ government.

*The authors also recommend:*

The political issues posed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions’ “Change the Rules” campaign  
[22 October 2018]



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