

Australia: Tasmanian public sector workers strike over wages and conditions

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Thousands of public sector workers across Tasmania took strike action for several hours on Wednesday afternoon, fighting the state Liberal government's 2 percent annual cap on wage increases.

Workers have also voiced opposition to funding cuts and chronic understaffing across health, education and virtually every other public sector area, enforced by successive Labor-Green and Liberal governments, assisted by the trade unions.

According to media reports, a substantial proportion of the state's 29,000 public sector employees took part in the stoppage. Teachers participated en masse, forcing the government to close over 60 schools in the afternoon. Paramedics, hospital workers, firefighters and transport staff also walked out.

Employees at two casinos owned by Federal Group, a major hotel and gaming corporation, joined the strike. They are opposing the company's attempts to impose a new enterprise agreement that would maintain poverty wages, while introducing onerous shift arrangements and greater casualisation.

Around 3,000 workers participated in a protest outside state parliament in Hobart. Some 200 demonstrated in Launceston and 150 in Burnie.

Workers spoke about the increasingly difficult conditions they face. Alison McLean, a health worker who attended the Hobart rally, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "Everything's costing more: petrol, food, childcare. We need a pay rise. I need to be able to look after my family while I look after the community." Nicole Olechowski, a paramedic, said: "The Government needs to know we work bloody hard, everyone here works really hard and we need to be supported by them, we need to be looked after."

The stoppage—one of the largest in Tasmania over the past decade—expressed a growing desire by workers to

fight back. A day earlier, more than 150,000 workers rallied in Melbourne, the capital of the neighbouring state of Victoria, against the corporate-government offensive on jobs, wages and working conditions.

The aim of the trade unions that called the Tasmanian strike, however, was to channel workers' anger behind the re-election of another state Labor-Greens government. This dovetails with the Australian Council of Trade Unions' bogus "Change the Rules" campaign, which is promoting the fraud that workers' interests can be advanced through the installation of yet another big business federal Labor government.

Officials from the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and five other unions covering state employees warmly welcomed Tasmanian Labor leader Rebecca White to the Hobart protest. Labor and Greens MPs were also prominent at the event.

The CPSU is silent on the fact that the previous Labor-Greens government, which it helped to elect, introduced the 2 percent wage cap in 2011. The unions repeatedly signed enterprise agreements with that government restricting pay increases to below the rate of inflation, while suppressing opposition to the sweeping austerity program the government enforced from 2010 to 2014.

During its term in office, the Labor-Greens government sought to axe over 1,000 public sector jobs and shut down more than 20 schools. The CPSU blocked any real fight against these measures, or another 500 sackings by the Liberals after they formed government in 2014. From 2014 to 2018, the unions allowed the destruction of over 400 federal public sector jobs in the state, or around 10 percent of the total.

These cuts have intensified a social crisis, characterised by stagnant and declining wages and

rising unemployment. Across the public and private sectors, Tasmanian wage growth in the year to November was just 0.8 percent, according to federal treasury figures, compared with an average of 2.3 percent across the country. The average full-time weekly wage is \$212.30 lower than on the mainland.

Grade three registered nurses in the state, for instance, are paid about 11 percent less than their colleagues in Queensland. Similar wage disparities have hit teachers, firefighters and other workers.

Amid a rising cost of living, the CPSU's proposal for average pay rises of around 3 percent would perpetuate this low-wage regime. The unions' suggestion that the state's pro-business Industrial Commission should set wage rates and other conditions would also set the stage for further attacks on public sector workers.

The CPSU's role in Tasmania is paralleled nationally. Throughout 2017, the union rammed through enterprise agreements across the federal public sector, which cut real wages and intensified the assault on conditions.

After the expiry of previous agreements in 2013, the union divided workers department by department and confined opposition to sporadic strikes and protests centred on impotent appeals to the federal Liberal-National government.

The CPSU made clear that its main concern was not to be side-lined by the government, depriving it of its position at the bargaining table, where it trades away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The agreements were pushed through despite, in a number of cases, being virtually identical to those that workers had previously voted down on a number of occasions. They were based on the federal government's 2 percent wage cap, and were not backdated, so workers suffered a wage-freeze for up to four years.

This was a continuation of the unions' collaboration in a protracted onslaught on public sector jobs and conditions, which began in 1987 when Prime Minister Bob Hawke's Labor government introduced "efficiency dividends" mandating continuous funding reductions.

From 2007 to 2013, the public sector unions backed the federal Labor governments of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd, which eliminated up to 14,500 public

sector jobs. In 2013, the Rudd government increased the "efficiency dividend" from 1.25 percent to 2.25 percent, paving the way for subsequent cuts by Liberal-National governments.

State Labor governments, supported by the unions, have also taken the axe to the public sector. In September 2017, the Western Australian Labor government announced it would eliminate 3,000 public sector jobs over four years, as part of a broader drive to cut costs by \$1.7 billion. The CPSU had campaigned for Labor's election on the bogus grounds that it would end funding reductions imposed by the previous Liberal government.

In December 2017, the South Australian Labor government of Premier Jay Weatherill announced the destruction of 750 positions. The Public Service Association bemoaned the cuts, but declared that "cost reductions" were necessary.

The record makes clear that public sector workers can defeat the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions only through a complete break with Labor and the unions. New organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, are needed to unify workers throughout the sector in a common struggle against the cuts being imposed by every government.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective that rejects the subordination of social services and every aspect of life, to the austerity demands of a tiny corporate elite. This means the fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership, and investing trillions of dollars in health, education and other social necessities.



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