

Australian unions support Queensland Labor government's public sector wage freeze

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Backed by the trade unions, in defiance of widespread anger among their members, the state Labor Party government in Queensland last week pushed through legislation for a public sector pay freeze, thinly disguised as a “deferral.”

While portrayed by the government and the unions as a temporary measure to defray the economic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic, it sets a new precedent for exploiting the health emergency to intensify the ongoing corporate and government attack on the living and working conditions of workers.

The legislation cancels all the previously-agreed wage increases for this year and 2021, amounting to 2.5 percent this year and the same next year. In April, Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk initially announced a 12-month wage freeze. Now, through a deal cut with the unions, this will be a two-year “deferral,” with the unpaid wage rises supposedly to occur in 2022.

In reality, with the pandemic worsening worldwide, there is no guarantee of any pay make-up in two years' time. Moreover, the government has refused to provide any estimate of how much the revamped plan will cost the 230,000 affected workers—10 percent of the state's workforce—even if it honours that promise.

By one estimate, made by the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU), the government will effectively take \$500 million from the pockets of public sector workers, including cleaners, nurses, firefighters and paramedics, with \$100 million of that coming from QTU members.

Given the cost of living, any pay deferral is in truth a cut, at a time in which most workers and their families are under tremendous stress from having lost jobs and other sources of income.

Nevertheless, the Queensland Council of Unions (QCU) has openly backed the plan. QCU General Secretary Michael Clifford claimed: “The deferral now

proposed by the government will mean that workers will still receive the same pay increases over the life of their agreement.”

As for the teachers union, it is trying to head off the anger of its members by proposing a ballot, but with one option being to accept the pay cut, alongside other options of limited industrial action or protest campaigns.

One teacher told the WWS: “The people in my staff room are not happy. We have done a lot more work in the past period to cope with the pandemic, and now we are having a pay cut. An industrial relations rollover is taking place. The union has done nothing to fight this, and now it is treading water with a fake ballot plan.”

State Industrial Relations Minister Grace Grace said: “We are not asking the public sector to do anything that members of parliament, ministerial staff, senior public service will not be asked to do.” Such claims are preposterous, given that members of parliament earn a base salary (before entitlements and other claims) of double the median state wage.

In an earlier effort to let off workers' steam over the freeze, and seek a deal with the government, Australian Workers Union (AWU) called a token one-hour walkout by health workers on June 5. At the time, AWU state secretary Steve Baker promised further action. But last week he endorsed the “deferral” deal, claiming it ensures that health workers “aren't left completely out in the cold.” An AWU leaflet circulated called the legislation “a big step forward.”

Other unions were more explicit in backing the demand for sacrifice from their members. United Workers Union (UWU) state secretary Gary Bullock said his union “understood the financial situation of the state.”

Nationally, the unions have made every effort to keep

workers isolated across both industry and state lines, despite similar measures being announced. No attempt has been made to engage in a joint struggle against a similar public sector wage freeze in neighbouring New South Wales, and the federal Liberal-National Coalition government's public sector pay freeze.

It is significant that the Labor Party has been at the forefront, in Queensland, of imposing wage cuts. While held up by the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations as a "lesser evil" to the Coalition, Labor has formed a virtual de facto government with the Coalition, via the "national cabinet" of federal, state and territory government leaders.

Likewise, the Australian Council of Trade Unions has joined Prime Minister Scott Morrison's federal Coalition government and the employers in five tripartite working groups to restructure working conditions.

The pay freezes will pave the way for further attacks on jobs and working conditions, while governments are continuing to hand billions of dollars to business to safeguard profits. The unions' suppression of their members' opposition to the pay freeze further demonstrates that workers can defend their interests only by breaking with these thoroughly corporatised entities and forming rank-and-file action committees.

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