

Growth of the class struggle in Australia highlights need for rank-and-file committees

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On Tuesday, mass industrial action across several strategic industries had a substantial impact on Sydney, Australia's most populous capital, for the first time since the pandemic began. The stoppages are part of a broader increase of the class struggle, registered in an increasing number of workplace disputes and days lost due to strikes.

While industrial action remains low, the disputes point to a growing mood of opposition within the working class, amid stagnant wages, a growing cost of living, escalating pro-business restructuring and the ruling elite's drive to force the population to "live with the virus."

The struggles are emerging after the corporatised trade unions, working together with the employers and governments, began imposing the cost of the pandemic on the working class, including by ensuring that 2020 witnessed one of the lowest levels of industrial action in recorded history. More broadly, however, the workers involved are up against the consequences of a decades-long offensive against jobs, wages and conditions, and the structures that have enforced it, including the trade unions and the draconian Fair Work industrial regime they defend.

The three disputes that resulted in Tuesday's stoppages point to some of the common features in the emerging class struggle. They involved 50,000 public school teachers, who carried out their first strike in a decade, more than 1,000 rail workers, who were also involved in industrial action for 24-hours and some 1,200 bus drivers in western Sydney.

In each case, the workers are animated by fundamental issues of conditions, which raise existential issues for their profession, and by hostility to the repression of their pay.

The interrelation between the two issues is clear in the teachers' dispute. Since 2011, they have been subjected to a statewide public sector pay cap across New South Wales (NSW), generally standing at 2.5 percent per annum, often at or beneath the rate of inflation. Last year they were hit by a wage freeze, introduced by the NSW Liberal-National government on the pretext of the pandemic.

The stagnant wages have combined with minimal government funding for public education and continuous restructuring, including the boosting of the power of principals to hire and fire and the continuous subordination of teaching to market-oriented testing.

The consequence is that teachers have left the profession in droves, and nine out of ten that remain told a survey last month

that they were considering quitting. It is now routine, especially at working-class schools, for dozens of lessons each week to go unfilled because there is no one to teach them, while educators are expected to put in hours of unpaid labour as a matter of course. The pandemic has only exacerbated and highlighted teachers' impossibly high workloads.

The rail workers are also subject to the pay cap, under which any rise in pay greater than 2.5 percent per annum must be offset with other reductions to labour costs. Their dispute, which included a partial 24-hour strike on Tuesday, hinges not only on the issue of wages, but also the growing use of casual and contract labour, and restructuring, including the introduction of new trains designed to eliminate guard roles and boost drivers' workload.

The bus drivers are facing the consequences of what is being prepared in rail: privatisation. On Monday, workers in Region 6 walked off. The majority of drivers in the region were previously employed by the state government and now face an assault as private operator Transit Systems seeks to impose, across the board, pay and conditions previously only suffered by a lower tier of new hires. On Tuesday, Region 3 staff, who are also covered by this second-tier union-management agreement, walked off, demanding pay parity with other regions.

In each of the disputes, the conditions workers are opposing are the direct consequence of one sell-out industrial award or enterprise agreement after another pushed by the unions going back over decades.

In the three disputes, the unions involved are advancing pitiful demands that would do nothing to address the crisis facing the workers they falsely claim to represent. The New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) is calling for annual wage increases of five percent per annum, less than two percent above inflation and far less than what has been taken from teachers through the wage cap, and an additional 2.5 percent for senior staff.

With horrific conditions driving teachers out of the profession, all the NSWTF suggests is an additional two hours a week set aside for non-teaching tasks, on the preposterous grounds that this will address the massive workload issues.

In the bus dispute, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) are calling for wage rises of just 2.5 percent per annum, less than the rate of inflation, and no pay increase at all for some of the divers. The privatisation of the network, which they helped to introduce, is taken as given.

On the railways, the RTBU is calling for just 3.5 percent pay rises a year and job security clauses that are not worth the paper they are written on. Among its demands is: “Any employee affected by a restructure or workplace change will be given priority for positions in the new structure,” a clear statement that the union is willing to enforce further pro-business overhauls.

In all of the disputes, the unions have suppressed the issue of COVID, not even mentioning it under conditions in which the ruling elite is enforcing a full “reopening of the economy” aimed at forcing the population to “live with the virus” in the interests of corporate profit. Each of the unions has ensured that its members have remained on the job, including when there were outbreaks among bus drivers. The NSWTF supported the resumption of full in-person teaching in October, which has resulted in more than 500 school outbreaks, which was not mentioned at Tuesday’s strike rallies.

The silence on COVID is a commitment on the part of the unions to continue enforcing the “let it rip” coronavirus policy. It is also bound up with the unions’ attempts to limit the emerging disputes to individual workplaces and sectors and to keep them restrained within the narrow confines of industrial and enterprise bargaining. The question of COVID raises a host of issues the unions want to bury. All those involved in industrial action are “front line” workers, who have been required to work in unsafe workplaces throughout the pandemic. The unions implemented government demands that saw their members face daily infections and disease with little to no protections. Placing these issues at the centre of the industrial action would raise the question of whether life and health are paramount, or profit and production. The pandemic also demonstrates that the workers in each sector can only advance their social interests through a broader, political, movement of the working class.

The NSWTF held the strike just as the school year was ending, and did not outline any further action other than appeals to the Liberal-National government. The transport unions have similarly sought to restrict action to sporadic and limited walk-outs only affecting parts of the network and are appealing for further negotiations with management.

To the extent the unions have called any action, it has been for fear of mounting rank-and-file anger.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that in the September quarter there were 50 industrial disputes across the country, up from 36 in the quarter ending in June and 24 to March. This is off the back of historic lows, including just 11 disputes in the quarter ending in June 2020.

That figure expressed the role played by the unions as the pandemic struck. Headed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, they ensured that workers remained on the job, while devising the pro-business JobKeeper wage subsidy, which funnelled billion to the largest corporations, and suspending or altering awards covering millions of workers, which allowed for cuts to overtime payments and the imposition of “flexible” hours. Over the course of 2020, real wages fell by more than 2 percent, the biggest decline in more than a decade.

The stoppages in the September quarter involved a little over 13,000 workers. Some 18,500 working days were lost, up from

10,400 the previous quarter. Working days lost have fluctuated over the past two years, after having barely exceeded 1,000 in the June, 2020 quarter. But the yearly figures show a clear trend. For the year ending September 2020, there were 78 disputes, compared with 118 in the year ending September 2021. Working days lost rose from 29,500 to 64,600.

The largest number of working days lost in the last September quarter were in transport, postal and warehousing, where the unions are working with company managements to shut warehouses, downsize employee numbers and bring the dire conditions of the gig-economy to tens of thousands of workers.

Given the mass teachers’ strike, the indicators for industrial activity in 2021 will likely be far above any over the past two years.

The emerging struggles are an initial manifestation within Australia of an upsurge of the working class internationally. The form that this process must take is a rebellion against the corporatised unions, which have suppressed the class struggle, not just over the course of the pandemic, but for most of the four decades prior.

Workers are confronted, not just with sectional disputes and issues, but with fundamental questions, including the sweeping casualisation of the entire workforce, the suppression of wages across the board and the deadly pandemic policies.

The emerging movement requires new organisations of struggle. At every workplace, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, are required to provide a forum for democratic discussion, the sharing of information and the planning of action, including strikes. Through an interconnected network of such committees, workers can break the isolation imposed by the unions and link up their struggles nationally and with their class brothers and sisters around the world.

This is a political struggle against the governments, Labor and the unions, as well as the Fair Work regime they have all used to impose the dictates of the corporations and to suppress workers’ opposition. Amid the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, expressed most sharply in the pandemic and the criminal response to it, workers need a new political perspective and program.

The defence of social rights, including to life and health, is incompatible with a society dominated by a tiny corporate oligarchy. The situation itself raises the necessity for a revolutionary, socialist perspective, aimed at reorganising society from top to bottom, including by placing the major corporations and the banks under public ownership and workers’ control, and establishing workers’ governments to fight for a global society based on social equality.



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