

Australia: 40,000 public sector workers to strike in New South Wales

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Up to 40,000 public sector workers will strike for 24 hours tomorrow throughout New South Wales (NSW), defying moves by the state Liberal-National Coalition government to ban the strike.

The striking workers are demanding a wage rise above the current rate of inflation after more than a decade of being subjected to a pay increase cap of 2.5 percent per annum. (The cap also includes annual superannuation increases of 0.5 percent mandated by the federal government, so the maximum increase in pay has been just 2.04 percent.)

The wage cap, introduced by the last state Labor government in 2008, although not legislated until 2011, affects all NSW public sector employees. It has been a central issue in recent strikes by nurses, hospital workers, teachers and rail workers. Yet every trade union covering public sector workers has enforced the cap through one regressive enterprise agreement or award negotiation after another.

Tomorrow's strike, like all these recent ones, is designed by the unions—in this case, Public Service Association (PSA)—to allow workers to “let off steam,” permitting the union bureaucrats to return to backroom negotiations with the government and prepare a sell-out. The unions have limited strikes to 24 hours or less, and isolated the different sections of workers, despite the common issues they confront, and calls by workers for unity.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supports the strike, which is an expression of growing anger and opposition among workers toward the punitive wage cap and the deepening assault on the public sector and the working class as a whole.

The SEP warns, however, that the PSA is leading workers down a dead-end road. Workers will gain nothing through isolated single-day strikes directed at making appeals to the government and promoting illusions in the Labor party, which, at state and federal level, is every bit as committed to the wage-slashing austerity agenda as the Coalition.

What is required is a unified struggle by the working class, across the entire public sector—including teachers, health workers and transport workers—and more broadly, against all the major parties, including Labor. This brings workers into direct conflict with the unions, whose role is to contain workers' struggles and prevent any eruption that threatens the ruling elite.

This means workers need their own organisations, completely independent of the unions. The SEP urges workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace as the first step to waging a political fight for secure jobs, decent conditions and genuine pay

increases, well above the rate of inflation and with regular cost of living adjustments.

The PSA, like the other unions, is falsely characterising the wage cap as solely the fault of the Liberal-National government of Premier Dominic Perrottet. At the same time, the union is appealing to his government for concessions, even after it asked the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to shut down the strike.

The reality is that the Victorian state Labor government lowered the state's public sector pay cap from 2 percent to 1.5 percent in January, while Western Australian Premier Mark McGowan last month claimed his Labor government's 2.75 percent cap was “generous,” despite being well below the rate of inflation.

Perrottet's desperate manoeuvres and the union responses

Yesterday, Perrottet nervously announced a pitiful 3.0 percent pay rise for public sector workers this year, followed by a 3.5 percent increase in 2023, dependent on “productivity gains.” In other words, in exchange for what is, in real terms, a substantial wage cut, workers will be expected to increase output, inevitably in the form of job cuts and the slashing of working conditions.

This lines up completely with the agenda of the new federal Labor government, which rapidly dropped its pre-election promise of a “better future” and is demanding “sacrifices” from workers. Labor made clear in a submission to the Fair Work Commission last Friday that it is opposed to an “across-the-board” pay rise to meet inflation, and that any increase must be tied to ratcheting up “labour productivity.”

NSW Labor leader Chris Minns has likewise called for a “productivity-based bargaining system” in the public sector.

Perrottet also said health workers would receive a one-off \$3,000 payment. This followed earlier announcements of additional funding and staff for the state's crisis-wracked hospitals and ambulance service. This is a cynical ploy to divide public sector workers and help the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and Health Services Union (HSU) ram through sell-out deals and shut down strikes that enjoy broad public respect and support.

This is precisely what the unions are preparing. The NSWNMA declared this morning on Facebook, “Your strikes work!” even

though the NSW government still refuses to implement nurse-to-patient ratios, the central issue raised in the nurses' strikes.

The HSU declared Perrottet's announcement "a huge win," posting a graphic on Facebook that falsely included the one-off payment as part of the promised percentage increase, when the pay "rise" is in fact a pay cut. When health workers pointed this out and raised other questions about the announcement, the HSU shut down comments on the post.

The meagre concessions announced by Perrottet reflect growing concerns in the political establishment as a whole that mounting tensions in the working class will erupt into mass struggles that are beyond the capacity of the unions to control.

The PSA has called for a 5.2 percent wage rise, exclusive of superannuation. With inflation already at 5.1 percent for the March quarter, this would amount to a pay cut in real terms, even according to the Consumer Price Index, which significantly understates the rapidly rising cost of living.

Even by March, the cost of non-discretionary goods and services had increased by 6.6 percent. This includes housing, food, utilities and transport—the vast bulk of spending for workers.

Because of the global energy supply crisis, aggravated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the price of petrol has increased by 12 percent since already high levels in April, while household electricity prices are set to rise by up to 18 percent.

This comes on top of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the direct result of the murderous "let it rip" policies adopted by all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, and enforced by the unions.

Decades of union suppression of workers' struggles

These increasingly intolerable conditions are driving workers into struggle after decades of suppression. Like the NSW public school teachers last December, tomorrow's strike is the first in more than a decade.

After the 2011 legislation of the pay cap, the PSA diverted workers' opposition into a toothless petition to "debate" the state government. The following year, the union sent workers down another dead-end road, opposing the cap in the High Court on the basis that it interfered with the "independence" of the IRC, the state's anti-worker industrial court.

Later in 2012, the PSA limited workers' opposition to the wage cap, and the government's plan to cut 15,000 jobs and slash hard-won working conditions, to a single half-day strike, mostly directed toward the promotion of Labor ahead of the 2013 federal election. Reflecting workers' frustration with the union, the PSA leadership was ousted in a union election and replaced with representatives of the pseudo-left "progressive" faction of the PSA.

The new leadership continued with precisely the same program as the old, entering in to backroom negotiations with the government, calling off industrial bans and ramming through a sell-out deal that entrenched the wage cap and paved the way for the

destruction of thousands of jobs.

This episode provides a clear lesson for workers. The decades of sell-outs by the PSA and every other union is not the product of misjudgments or bad individuals in the leadership. The unions around the world have been transformed into industrial police forces of governments and the corporate elite. They cannot be reformed. The function of the supposedly "progressive" pseudo-lefts is to shut down any independent mobilisation by workers and promote illusions that a "stronger" union would resolve the issues confronting workers.

The fight for secure jobs, decent conditions and real wage increases to meet the rapidly rising cost of living requires a complete break with the unions and Labor, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees.

Through an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees, united across industries and states, workers can unite their various struggles into a single powerful mass movement.

Striking public sector workers must appeal to the growing layers of teachers, nurses, health, transport and other workers now entering into struggle. This is not possible within the framework of the unions, papering over their isolation tactics with hollow messages of "solidarity" from fellow bureaucrats.

At the heart of all these struggles are political issues of global significance. The fight for pay and conditions is bound up with the struggle to end the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia. In each case, workers find themselves in conflict with the capitalist profit system.

What is required is a socialist perspective: the reorganisation of society to meet the needs and social interests of the majority, the working class, not private profit. Workers' governments would place the banks and the major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control. These governments would end the vast funding to the military and handouts to billionaires, and redirect trillions of dollars to vital public services.



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