

Public sector unions preparing sell-out in Western Australia

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Several thousand public sector workers in Western Australia (WA) rallied in Perth on August 17 as part of a campaign against a pay increase cap enforced by the state Labor government of Premier Mark McGowan.

The workers have carried out limited industrial action over the past six weeks, demanding improved wages and working conditions in negotiations for new enterprise agreements (EAs).

The rally was called by the Public Sector Alliance (PSA), a group of nine unions formed last year in response to growing opposition among workers to the pay cap, which has been used since 2017 to impose harsh cuts to real wages.

This alliance is designed as a veneer of “solidarity” over the divisive tactics of the unions, giving workers an impression of a unified struggle, while the bureaucrats continue to work closely with management to broker individual sell-out deals. In July, the State School Teachers Union of WA called off all action by its members and accepted the 2.75 percent pay “rise” deal offered by the government.

In its initial form, the WA pay cap, which covers more than 150,000 public sector workers, including health staff, carers, firefighters and teachers, limited pay rises to a maximum of \$1,000 a year. The majority of employees received annual increases of between 1 and 1.5 percent.

Earlier this year, McGowan increased the cap to 2.5 percent with the option of an additional 0.25 percent or a \$1,000 sign-on bonus. The meagre increase was motivated by fear that seething discontent building among public sector workers could erupt in broad-based industrial action, outside of the control of the compliant public sector unions.

Still facing mounting popular anger, the McGowan government is now grudgingly offering a paltry 3

percent annual rise for two years, plus a one-off \$2,500 “cost of living payment.”

The revised offer is far below the rate of inflation in Perth, which at 7.4 percent is higher than the national figure of 6.1 percent. It does not even meet the unions’ sub-inflation claim of 5 percent.

The “cost of living payment” will not in any way compensate for the spiralling increase in the prices of essential goods such as fuel, food and electricity, or make up for previous losses. It is nothing more than a ploy to pressure workers who are struggling to make ends meet into signing off on the government’s regressive EA offer.

Owen Whittle, secretary of the state’s peak union body UnionsWA, issued a convoluted statement earlier this month, admitting that the government’s new offer “continues the trend of below cost of living pay increases” and failed “to adequately address the problems of attraction and retention in critical areas.”

In other words, there will be no end to the constant pressure on workers to cover severe staff shortages exacerbated by the massive surge in COVID-19 infections across the state caused by the Labor government’s abandonment of virtually all public health measures, including the effective and well-regarded “hard border” restrictions.

Even so, Whittle went on to claim that the one-off payment and the 3 percent pay rise “will protect low and some lower paid public sector workers” and promised “the unions will take time to work with our members and delegates to respond more fully to the government’s changed policy.”

Then, in what amounted to an offer to collaborate even more closely with the government to deliver its cost-cutting agenda, Whittle declared there had been “a missed opportunity to engage positively during this

economic challenge to design a policy that meets the needs of the public sector workforce and public services.”

WA public sector workers should reject all attempts by the unions to push through a sell-out deal and must instead initiate a genuine unified industrial and political campaign for pay outcomes to meet the cost of living and fully compensate for years of wage stagnation.

For this fight to go forward, workers must make a decisive break with the corporatised trade unions and turn to the building of independent rank-and-file committees to organise workers across the state and reach out to fellow public sector workers nationally, who are all facing similar attacks.

Around 170,000 public sector workers in NSW have been involved in industrial action this year, demanding an end to the 2.5 percent pay cap that has been in place across the sector for more than a decade, after it was first introduced by the Labor government in 2008.

For the first time in a decade, teachers and nurses have taken to the streets in their thousands in multiple 24-hour mass strikes, defying the attempted suppression of the industrial courts and the government. Despite growing calls from workers for a unified struggle, the unions have ensured that the actions have been kept separate, most notably in the last week of June, when strikes by teachers, nurses and rail workers were confined to different days.

In Tasmania, public sector workers have been taking industrial action over wages and working conditions in a dispute over 16 new EAs. The Liberal state government of Premier Jeremy Rockliff is intent on imposing a below inflation pay “increase” of just 2.5 percent.

In January, with inflation already beginning to take off, the Victorian Labor government lowered its wage rise ceiling from 2 percent to just 1.5 percent.

Northern Territory teachers have begun limited industrial action in opposition to the Labor government’s attempt to impose a deal providing an average \$2,500 annual pay increase over four years. In Queensland, the state Labor government is determined to maintain its 2.5 percent public sector pay cap.

The suppression of wages by state governments is totally in line with the austerity agenda of the recently elected federal Labor government, aimed at forcing the working class to pay for the national debt accrued

through handouts to big business, especially during the pandemic, and massive military spending.

Federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers last month declared that, amid a “one in a generation” crisis, working people would need to swallow “tough medicine.” This makes clear that Labor’s election campaign slogan of a “better future,” which was heavily promoted by the unions, was an outright fraud.

In league with the federal and state governments, the unions have done everything to contain and isolate the struggles of public sector workers and prevent them from linking up in a unified national offensive to fight for their interests. The record shows that such a mobilisation cannot be built within the orbit of the unions and can only be realised through the creation of an alliance of independent rank-and-file committees in every state and every workplace.

Above all, the struggle must be based on the fight to establish a workers’ government to enact socialist policies to reorganise society under the democratic control of the working class, meeting the needs of the majority, not the financial interests of the wealthy few.



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