

Australian workers striking at highest rate in almost two decades

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Amid a deepening social crisis driven by the highest inflation in three decades, successive interest rate rises and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, strike activity in Australia has reached the highest level since June 2004.

Since December last year, numerous mass strike rallies have been held around the country. In the year ending June 2022, industrial disputes resulted in the loss of 234,700 working days, more than the combined total from January 2018 to June 2021.

The issues workers confront are global, and the emerging struggles of workers in Australia are part of an upsurge of the working class internationally. As is the case around the world, workers' determination to fight is bringing them into conflict with the trade unions, which are working feverishly to ram through sell-out deals and shut down disputes.

For decades, the corporatised trade unions have kept a tight lid on workers' struggles and enforced a massive assault on jobs, wages and conditions. In 2020, the unions stepped up their collaboration with big business and governments, helping impose the cost of the pandemic on the working class by keeping strike activity to record lows.

In March 2020, millions of workers were suddenly thrown on the scrapheap, prompting ruling class fears of an explosion of social unrest. Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary Sally McManus worked closely with the Liberal-National government to develop the JobKeeper wage subsidy, which handed over billions of dollars to big business and granted employers extraordinary powers to slash workers' conditions in exchange for a meagre \$1,500 per fortnight.

The unions have ensured workers remained on the job in unsafe conditions throughout the pandemic and played a critical role in enforcing the "let it rip" COVID-19 policies of all Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, responsible for more than 12,000 deaths and at least 10 million infections in 2022 alone.

Workers' experiences throughout the pandemic, along with the rapidly rising cost of living and the cumulative effect of decades of stagnant and declining wages, are reflected in a renewed determination to fight. Increasingly, workers are refusing to accept the unions' claims that sub-inflationary pay "rises," with no improvements to conditions, are the "best they can expect."

Last week, health workers at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse, a private cancer treatment centre in Sydney, rejected a wage-cutting agreement after nurses circulated an open letter urging their co-workers to vote "no". The letter was developed in opposition to the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association, which had adopted a "neutral" position, effectively endorsing the rotten deal.

This is a significant development and a critical first step towards the development of a necessary rebellion against the union. Rejecting rotten agreements or demanding strikes will not resolve the issues workers confront. As long as these disputes remain under the control of the unions, they will end in betrayal.

Critical lessons must be drawn from experiences such as the sell-out of Victorian teachers earlier this year by the Australian Education Union. In the face of substantial opposition from educators, the union worked hand-in-glove with the state Labor government to ram through a wage-slashing agreement that did nothing to address the impossible conditions confronting teachers.

Workers must form their own organisations of struggle, completely independent of the unions. These workplace rank-and-file committees will provide the forum for workers to democratically discuss the issues they confront and prepare demands based on what they need, not what the unions or management say is affordable or possible.

Through a fight to build these rank-and-file committees, workers can begin to develop a mechanism through which they can assert their power. As a matter of urgency, these committees must smash the isolation imposed by the unions and reach out to the growing sections of workers, throughout the country and around the world, who are entering into struggle.

According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 128,100 working days were lost to strikes and other industrial disputes in April, May and June, more than four times the quarterly average over the past ten years. Around 73,700 workers took strike action in the June quarter, the highest level of participation in strikes since December 2005.

Analysis of data from the Fair Work Commission (FWC) shows that the increased strike activity over recent months is

only the beginning. Since late 2019, the number of workers voting to take industrial action has increased dramatically.

In the first quarter of 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing only a minor role, strike ballots were held at 84 workplaces. Two years later, at the height of the first Omicron wave, 146 ballots were held in the first quarter of 2022. In the following three months, 175 workplaces held strike votes.

Already this quarter, at least 184 strike ballot applications have been lodged with the FWC. Of the 80 of these ballots for which results have been published, all but ten were successful, with 68 percent of the 13,692 eligible workers voting to strike.

The majority of the recent surge has taken place in the New South Wales (NSW) public sector, especially among nurses and teachers. The unions have been able to suppress opposition to a 2.5 percent cap on annual public sector wage increases for more than a decade.

Unable to completely shut down workers' demands for action, the unions are stepping up their efforts to isolate and demoralise. Compelled by the anger and frustration of workers to call strikes, the unions have limited them to sporadic stoppages of 24 hours or less. The purpose of this is to allow workers to "let off steam" before the union rams through a rotten deal it has cooked up with management, claiming it is "the best we could have hoped for."

Between January 2003 and December 2007, only 21 percent of disputes ended with a "pre-determined return to work," according to the ABS. Over the next eight years, an average of 52 percent of disputes ended in this way, and since the start of 2017, this has increased to 68 percent.

But the unions are now finding it more difficult to wrap these disputes up. Workers are increasingly opposed to returning to work with none of their demands met and are refusing to accept union-management deals containing massive cuts to real wages.

While the level of industrial activity in Australia remains at historically low levels, the June quarter figures are an indication that the class struggle is beginning to re-emerge after decades of suppression by the unions, Labor and the industrial courts.

Under Australia's draconian "Fair Work" laws, enacted by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2008, workers are only permitted to strike during enterprise agreement negotiations, and only then after proving they have engaged in "good faith bargaining."

Enterprise bargaining itself was established in the early 1990s by the union-backed Keating Labor government as a means of suppressing wages and conditions in order to drive up "productivity" and profits for big business. Since then, real wages per unit of output have been slashed.

The unions have played a critical role in suppressing opposition to this assault. In 1991, more than 1.61 million working days were lost to strikes. By 2000, this fell to 469,000, before declining to 127,000 in 2010. Since 2009, the average annual wage increase in enterprise agreements has sunk from 4

percent to 2.6 percent.

This has not proceeded without consequences for the bureaucracy. Decades of betrayals and a growing sense among workers that the unions will not advance their interests have seen union membership fall from 46 percent in 1986 to 14 percent in 2020.

The reach of enterprise bargaining is also declining. At the end of 2013, 2.63 million workers were covered by enterprise agreements. By March this year, that had fallen to 1.66 million. This presents a problem for business, government and the unions, which have relied upon enterprise bargaining as the primary mechanism of wage suppression for decades.

The need to expand the influence of the unions and enterprise bargaining was a central component of the recent Jobs and Skills Summit called by the federal Labor government.

The introduction of multi-employer bargaining in small business—more than half the Australian workforce—and sectors such as aged care and early childhood education is aimed at empowering the unions to extend their sphere of wage and social unrest suppression across increasing numbers of workers. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations documents released last week make clear that this is not intended to "provide for sector-wide or industry-wide strikes."

The growth of industrial action over recent months demonstrates that Australian workers are determined to fight against the deepening assault on the working class. Such a struggle is impossible within the framework of the trade unions, which are committed to enforcing the massive cuts to real wages, conditions and social spending demanded by the corporate elite and the federal Labor government.

The emerging movement in the working class needs new organisations of struggle—rank-and-file committees—and a new political perspective. What is required is not just an industrial struggle, but a fight against big business, the parliamentary parties, unions, industrial courts and all other representatives of the capitalist system.

The defence of wages and conditions is incompatible with an economic system in which workers' needs are entirely subordinated to the profit demands of the corporate elite. This raises the necessity for a fight to establish workers' governments to carry out socialist policies, including placing the major corporations and banks under public ownership and workers' control. Only in this way can the vast resources available to society be used to serve the needs of the entire working class, rather than the further enrichment of the wealthy few.



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