

# Public sector workers across Tasmania, Australia, strike against government austerity measures

Karen Maxwell  
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Thousands of public sector workers participated in stop-work rallies across the state of Tasmania last Wednesday. Teachers, teachers' assistants, paramedics, fire fighters, allied health workers, cleaners, hospital caterers, park rangers, and child protection officers rallied in Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, and Devonport, demanding higher wages and improved working conditions.

Multiple public sector unions under the umbrella of Unions Tasmania organised the demonstrations. That the union bureaucracy felt compelled to organise the joint industrial action reflects the explosive anger developing within important sections of the working class over intolerable working conditions and eroding living standards. Prior to last week's action, in the last period the union bureaucrats have called only isolated, mini stop work protests of nurses, paramedics, and teachers, separate from each other, in order to let off steam and buy time.

Jessica Munday, Unions Tasmania secretary, issued a nervous warning to the state Liberal government of Premier Jeremy Rockliff after the rallies. "I hope that he [Rockliff] looks at the depth of public sector workers who turned out today and reconsiders," she said. "To be honest, for a number of members, the frustration has been building for a long time and some we've had to hold back from taking this action."

The Rockliff government is attempting to impose its "final offer" on public sector workers: a nominal pay rise of 3.5 percent for next year, followed by annual pay rises of 3 percent for the following two years.

This represents a substantial real wage cut. Tasmania has an official inflation rate of 8.6 percent, the highest in Australia. The actual cost of living for working

people is rising even more rapidly—the annual cost of electricity is rising by 29.9 percent, housing by 14.5 percent, and transport by 14.1 percent. At the same time, average wages in Tasmania are 13 percent lower than the national average.

The trade union bureaucracy is doing everything it can to shut down workers' calls for a genuine struggle against the deepening assault on their wages and conditions. Munday made the unions' orientation clear at the Hobart rally: "He [Rockliff] is doing everything he can to make excuses and push off blame, when the blame is squarely at his feet. He could have stopped this action by putting a decent offer on the table, and he chose not to."

In other words, if only the government had made some small concession, the union bureaucrats could have used that as a pretext to call off the stoppages and push through a sell-out agreement, telling workers it was the best deal they could hope for.

The union leadership has been careful not to issue a specific wage rise demand, leaving room for any figure that exceeds the government's existing offer to be promoted as a "win," even if it amounts to a substantial pay cut in real terms.

The bureaucracy has played a crucial role in enforcing attacks on workers' conditions over the previous decade, under Labor, Liberal, and Greens governments alike. The unions have enforced numerous sell-out deals, such as the 2019 agreement for Tasmanian public school teachers, in which the Australian Education Union (AEU) bureaucracy agreed to a pay increase of just 2.5 percent for teachers and abandoned its original demand for a cap on class sizes.

Rallying workers who spoke to the Australian

Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) provided a glimpse of the intolerable conditions they confront. Teachers' assistant Ros Page said: "Class sizes have gotten bigger, the teachers are run off their feet, as support staff we try and support as best we can, but sometimes if you have got special needs students—two or three in one class—it is hard to do that."

Paramedic Jan Bur said: "We have got staff who are being treated like rubbish, being put on one contract after another with no job security. It is no hidden fact that we have the worst response times in Australia. This puts a lot of pressure on paramedics that are working as hard as they can. We have huge amounts of overtime. Yesterday I had no meal at all because it was one job after another."

In a letter to the Rockliff government, published by the Australian Nurses and Midwives' Federation (ANMF), a nurse wrote: "I am actively seeking work elsewhere because the thought of going to work gives me anxiety, lack of sleep and stress that is not sustainable. The number of new and younger nurses I find in tears due to the overwhelming work conditions is not fair. I know I could do better for my patients, but the dire staffing levels make it impossible to provide even basic care."

The Rockliff government is determined to make the working class bear the burden of the inflation crisis. Tasmania's budget is in deficit and state debt is growing, predicted to reach \$5.2 billion by the end of 2026. The state has been put on notice by finance capital—credit rating agencies have since 2016 given it a rating of "Aa2," two ranks below the highest AAA rating. Credit ratings agency Moody's vice-president and senior credit officer, John Manning, warned via the *Australian Financial Review* that further government spending would "drive fiscal deficits over the four years to 2026 and push net debt higher, a credit negative."

But the issues confronting workers are not peculiar to Tasmania and the agenda of cuts to wages and social spending is by no means limited to the Liberal government. The federal Labor government's first budget, announced last month, represents the harshest attack on working-class living standards since World War II. Funding for public hospitals will be slashed by \$2.4 billion over four years, amid the ongoing pandemic. Under Labor's budget, real wages will

continue falling for at least two years, and unemployment will rise to at least 4.5 percent.

To secure decent wages and conditions, public sector workers need to take their struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file committees, democratically organised in every workplace and led by trusted workers. These committees need to fight for the closest unity, including with private sector workers confronting similar attacks, and develop the sustained industrial action required to defeat the Rockliff government's real wage cutting drive.

This is above all a political struggle, not just against the Liberal government, but against Labor and the union bureaucracy. The fight to secure properly funded, high quality, and universally accessible public services is inseparable from the fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.

This perspective is advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the rank-and-file committees that its members and supporters are leading. The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (HWRFC) and the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) are holding an important public meeting on November 20, "Unite educators and health workers: Oppose the ending of COVID protection measures! Lives before profit!" The meeting is being held online on Sunday, November 20 at 3 p.m. (AEDT)—Tasmanian public sector workers are encouraged to register and attend.



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