

Australian strike wave continues despite union suppression

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Amid rampant inflation, compounded by successive interest rate rises, growing numbers of Australian workers are calling for industrial action to demand real wage increases and improvements to conditions.

Data released last week by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reveal that 28,100 working days were lost to industrial action in the September quarter, involving 22,200 workers in 70 separate disputes. Already, in the first three quarters of 2022, 175,800 working days have been lost to strikes, more than in any entire year since 2012.

This surge of industrial action is taking place despite the combined effort of the unions and the Labor government to shut down workers' opposition to real wage cuts and attacks on their standard of living.

In every strike, workers find themselves in conflict, not just with their employer, but with a union apparatus that has presided over the decades-long destruction of jobs, wages and conditions and the virtual elimination of industrial action. Since the 1980s, the unions have been completely transformed into an industrial police force tasked with enforcing the cuts demanded by corporations and governments to ensure "Australian" businesses are "competitive" in the global economy.

The growth of the class struggle in Australia is part of a global process. Millions of workers around the world are engaging in strikes and protests as soaring inflation and harsh social spending cuts render "ordinary" existence impossible. Underlying this strike wave is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in which, as a result of the murderous "herd immunity" policies adopted by all capitalist governments, workers everywhere confront the daily threat of serious illness and death.

Equally universal is the tripartite corporate-government-union campaign to shut down this eruption. In Britain, workers in almost every industry are striking in their hundreds of thousands as union bureaucrats, in collaboration with the Conservative government and the Labour opposition, scramble to shut down disputes and impose massive wage cuts. In the United States, the Biden administration, in lock-step with the Republicans, has conspired with the unions and rail corporations to prevent a nationwide strike by rail workers and impose a rotten wage-cutting contract.

While the number of days lost to strikes in Australia during the September quarter is significantly lower than the June quarter figure of 128,100—the highest since June 2004—this does not express a downturn in the class struggle in Australia.

Instead, what it reflects is the role of the trade union bureaucracies in suppressing industrial action by workers who are determined to fight. Of particular significance were the unions covering teachers and nurses in New South Wales (NSW) where mass strikes by tens of thousands of public sector educators and health workers in the first

half of the year contributed heavily to the June quarter figures.

None of the issues that drove those workers to take action has been resolved, from chronic understaffing, woeful pay and inadequate resources, to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated all the existing problems and forced teachers and nurses to risk their health and lives every day.

But the NSW Teachers' Federation and the Nurses and Midwives' Association have done everything possible to limit industrial action, isolate workers and divert their struggles into election campaigns for the Labor Party in the lead-up to next year's state election.

The promotion of illusions in Labor by the unions before and after the May federal election was also a factor in suppressing strike activity more broadly during the September quarter. The bureaucracies enthusiastically parroted Labor's pre-election promise of a "better future" in a bid to convince workers that the escalating crisis they confronted would be resolved at the polling booth, rather than in struggle.

The bankruptcy of this perspective was exposed by the almost immediate turn by Labor, once elected, to demands that the working class must make "sacrifices" and swallow "tough medicine."

Since the election, there has been a major upsurge in the demands of workers for strikes. In the September quarter, 243 protected action ballots were held. This is a 38 percent increase on the 176 ballots held in the June quarter, which had been the highest since the start of the pandemic.

Of the 191 for which results have been published, 161 (84 percent) were successful. More than 17,000 workers explicitly voted in favour of industrial action.

Under Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, these ballots are part of an arcane process that must be completed before workers can legally strike. At least half the union members in a workplace must vote and a majority of those must vote in favour. Only union members are allowed to take part in industrial action, which, with the exception of strikes over immediate safety issues, can only be held during bargaining for a new enterprise agreement.

The role of the union bureaucracies is expressed in the disparity between the number of disputes in which strikes take place and the growing number of workers demanding action. A successful protected action ballot is viewed by the union leadership as an indication of where it must quickly work with management to stitch up a deal it can sell to workers as a "win." A brief examination of some recent disputes exposes these agreements as anything but.

In May, more than 2,400 allied health workers across the Victorian hospital system voted for industrial action. But this was limited by the Health Services Union bureaucracy to toothless measures including

wearing union clothing and refusing to work through rostered breaks. The union leadership swiftly proclaimed the dispute over, on the basis of a paltry 2 percent per annum pay rise, a massive wage cut in real terms.

In August, around 900 Qantas Group aircraft maintenance engineers voted overwhelmingly in favour of strikes of up to 12 hours but the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) leadership restricted them to a farcical one-minute strike.

On December 2, ALAEA Secretary Steve Purvinas told members an in-principle agreement had been reached with the Qantas Group airlines. While the union has not published details of the deal, it had only advanced demands for pay rises of 3 to 5 percent annually, following a wage freeze of up to four years.

Almost 400 Nine Entertainment journalists voted for industrial action in August but this was limited by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) to wearing union t-shirts at work and posting about the dispute on social media. The MEAA quickly rammed through a deal in early September, containing pay “rises” of just 4 percent in 2022 and 3.5 percent in 2023, far less than inflation and short of even the meagre 5 percent demand previously advanced by the union.

More than 3,000 university workers across the country voted for industrial action in the September quarter, joining thousands more who demanded strikes earlier in the year. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has isolated and minimised the disputes, repeatedly shut down strikes and is ramming through wage-slashing deals it falsely promotes as “historic wins.”

In disputes where the anger and frustration of workers compels the union bureaucracy to call strikes to allow workers to let off steam, corporations and the state are increasingly resorting to punitive measures. In the past three months alone—at Knauf, Qenos, Pacific National and elsewhere—managements have responded to limited industrial action by locking out the workforce indefinitely.

The sharpest recent expression of this was at Svitzer, which has a virtual monopoly on tugboat operations. In response to limited stoppages as part of a four-year dispute over the company’s moves to slash wages, jobs and conditions, Svitzer announced a complete lockout, which would effectively close the nation’s ports and result in thousands of workers throughout the maritime and logistics sector being stood down.

This was a carefully orchestrated plot to provoke the intervention of the Fair Work Commission (FWC) and the federal Labor government to shut down the dispute. While the FWC criticised the transparent manoeuvre, it ordered a six-month ban on industrial action, stripping away the basic rights of workers. The FWC placed no limitation on the day-to-day operations of Svitzer, which can still proceed with its bid to tear up the enterprise agreement covering workers, eliminating hard-won conditions and potentially slashing their wages in half.

The maritime unions proclaimed this a “victory.”

In Western Australia, the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), in close collaboration with the state Labor government, responded to a single 24-hour strike by nurses over real wage cuts and patient safety by threatening to terminate the registration of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF). This would not only ban workers from striking but would lead to a new enterprise agreement, delivering Labor’s every wage- and condition-cutting demand, being imposed upon workers by the IRC.

The ANF bureaucracy replied to the aggressive threat of deregistration, unprecedented in the past three decades, by declaring

that there would be no further strikes.

The union leaders agree completely with the anti-worker industrial courts and the draconian laws they enforce, and which the unions, in league with the Rudd-Gillard Labor government, played a chief role in drafting.

The response to the growing class struggle has been to enthusiastically promote the federal Labor government’s new industrial relations legislation, which will further eviscerate the right of workers to oppose attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

Behind the new laws is Labor’s concern that the unions will not be able to prevent an explosion of the mounting wave of class unrest. Therefore, it is necessary to grant the FWC stepped-up powers to intervene in disputes, prevent strikes and impose the demands of big business on workers directly.

Growing numbers of workers in Australia, like their counterparts around the world, are entering the class struggle, driven by rapid rises in the cost of living and increasingly intolerable conditions.

But anger and determination are not enough. In order to fight for decent wages and conditions, workers must take up a political struggle, not just against the corporations, but against the industrial courts and the anti-strike laws they enforce, as well as Labor and the rest of the political establishment.

Such a fight is impossible without first breaking free from the straitjacket imposed by the union apparatus. New organs of struggle must be formed—rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

These committees are the only mechanism through which workers can end decades of suppression by the corporatised trade unions and begin to mount the necessary struggle against capitalism, an economic system in which workers’ needs are entirely subordinated to the profit demands of the corporate elite.

Through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, workers in Australia can link up with their counterparts around the world and prepare a unified counter-offensive to the global assault on the working class.

Ultimately, this means 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 profit demands of the wealthy few.



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