

Thousands of building workers protest across Australia over wages and anti-strike laws

Martin Scott
11 April 2023

Last Wednesday, tens of thousands of construction workers marched in the streets of Australia's capital cities. Amid rapid rises in the cost of living and a string of building industry collapses, workers called for real wage increases, improved job security and safety and an end to the country's pro-business anti-strike laws.

The leadership of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), along with other building industry unions, called the rallies in response to mounting anger and frustration among workers as a means of allowing them to let off steam.

Clearly responding to these growing tensions, union speakers played to the crowd with phoney militant rhetoric. Paul Keating, New South Wales (NSW) secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), now a division of the CFMMEU, declared, "Now's the time we start organising general strikes, we shut the cities down, we shut the towns down and we fight for what's ours."

After the obligatory initial bluster, one union bureaucrat after another spelled out their real plans, to issue plaintive demands to Labor for reforms that are mainly geared towards further entrenching their own role as an industrial police force.

The real purpose of these events is to funnel every aspect of workers' anger into the safe channel of union-organised protests and away from any challenge to the political establishment. This was reflected in the smorgasbord of issues raised by speakers at the rallies, including award wages, silicosis, sham contracting, corporate insolvencies and the anti-worker Fair Work Act.

Workers' concerns over all these issues are genuine, but the union bosses' pantomime of militancy is not. The bureaucracy is desperately trying to promote illusions that every facet of the increasingly impossible conditions workers face is a hangover from previous Liberal-National governments and will therefore soon be resolved.

The timing of the "national day of action," just weeks after the NSW state election, is significant. While Labor's narrow victory in NSW does not in any way reflect a mass base of support in the working class, the party's vague pledge to slightly increase (in nominal terms) public sector wages was heavily promoted by the unions.

Labor now holds power in every state and territory, except Tasmania, as well as federally. This means Labor will come under increasing pressure from workers to deliver on the phoney promises of a "better future" and a "fresh start" that they have taken to recent elections.

The union bureaucracy knows full well that Labor will deliver nothing of the sort. The government's agenda is one of harsh cuts to wages and social spending, driven in no small part by the need to finance its escalating military expenditure in preparation for a US-led war against China.

This means the union apparatus has a vital role to play in suppressing the opposition of the working class to these attacks.

CFMMEU National Secretary Christy Cain declared at the Sydney rally, "[the Labor government] have to understand—where did the money come from to get them elected? If they're not going to deliver for us, we're coming for them."

In fact Cain's reference to the union's financial support for Labor—the CFMMEU donated \$4.3 million to the party in the 2021-22 financial year—underscores that the union apparatus effectively functions as part of the government.

The CFMMEU's diversion of millions of dollars of members' dues into the coffers of Labor administrations that govern in the interests of property developers is no accident. The union bureaucracy is itself closely tied to the construction corporations, including through CBUS Property, the investment and development business it jointly controls.

CFMMEU NSW Secretary Darren Greenfield said at the Sydney rally he was hopeful the state Labor government, "who we all supported, support us, sit at the table with us." He said the union would "apply pressure to them to start working with us to restore a lot of those things we've lost over the past 12 years."

Greenfield's message to workers is that drastic action is not necessary—the union bureaucracy will take care of things in back-room negotiations with the Labor government.

CFMMEU Victoria Secretary John Setka declared: "We have a Labor government but we have a lot of shit laws remaining from [Liberal-National former Prime Ministers] Howard, Abbott, Turnbull, Morrison and scumbags like that."

This is a deliberate attempt to pull the wool over workers'

eyes. Over the past four decades, Labor, aided and abetted every step of the way by the union apparatus, has carried out the sharpest attacks on workers' jobs, wages, conditions and basic rights.

This began under the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983-1996, with the prices and incomes Accords—a wholesale assault on the working class, carried out in complete collaboration with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

These included the 1993 introduction of enterprise bargaining, which divides workers workplace by workplace and which has served as the primary mechanism for driving down wages and conditions for 30 years. The Fair Work Act, which the bureaucrats falsely claim to oppose, was introduced by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2009.

MUA official Keating appealed to workers with his call to “rip up the Fair Work Act.” There is clearly substantial opposition to the draconian industrial relations legislation, which makes strikes illegal except during narrow enterprise bargaining windows every three to four years, and with explicit permission from the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

In fact, the bureaucrats have no intention of tearing up these anti-strike laws, which the union apparatus was instrumental in drafting and has played the key role in enforcing since their introduction.

Instead, they are trying to suppress workers' opposition to the FWC by promoting illusions that it can be made fair through the appointment by Labor of commissioners drawn from the unions' legal teams.

In February, unions lauded the Labor government's move to appoint Adam Hatcher as president of the FWC. Hatcher previously served as chief legal adviser for the NSW branch of the Transport Workers Union. As a vice president of the FWC, he played a leading role in the tribunal's decision in November last year to ban all industrial action by workers for six months at tugboat operator Svitzer, after the company threatened to lock out its entire workforce in a provocative and transparent manoeuvre designed to exploit Australia's anti-strike laws.

The unions likewise supported Labor's move late last year to ram through major amendments to the Fair Work Act. The central purpose of these was to give the FWC even greater powers to intervene in disputes and shut down strikes and other industrial action by workers.

This underscores the fact that workers cannot possibly fight to overturn the Fair Work Act while they remain shackled to a union apparatus that is the main enforcer of the anti-worker laws.

To oppose the deepening attack on their jobs, wages and basic rights, workers need to form their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the corporatised union organisations, in every workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, are the only mechanism through which the working class can

take up the necessary political struggle against Labor, the unions and the industrial courts, which all exist to defend capitalism and serve the interests of the wealthy elite.

This will require a turn to the broadest layers of workers, not only throughout the building industry and across Australia, but around the world. The basis for this exists in the escalating struggles of workers globally.

The union bureaucracy is conscious of a growing recognition among workers that what is taking place in Australia is part of a global process. This is why Cain noted at the Sydney rally, “In the UK they are very close to a national strike. What is it about? The cost of living.”

Conspicuously absent from Cain's account of developments in the UK was that the chief obstacle blocking the path of the British working class is the union bureaucracy.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union leadership is working desperately to ram through a wage-slashing sell-out deal after repeatedly shutting down strikes by tens of thousands of rail workers. A similar betrayal is being carried out by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) at Royal Mail, along with countless other examples in Britain and throughout the world.

Australian workers should draw sharp lessons from what is taking place in the UK. Less than a year ago, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch was also calling for a general strike, “the biggest resistance mounted by the entire trade union movement, rivalling the general strike of 1926, the suffragettes and Chartism.” The fraudulent character of these declarations has now been fully exposed. Lynch and the RMT have not only worked to prevent general strikes, but to force through the demands of the Tory government and the rail corporations.

The unions in Britain, Australia and around the world play the same role, having universally transformed into an industrial enforcement arm of governments and big business.

This underscores the need for workers to build rank-and-file committees and link up with their counterparts around the world, through the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

This is the only means through which workers around the world can build the necessary political and industrial counter-offensive to defeat capitalism, which has nothing to offer the working class but relentless exploitation and endless war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact