

Australia: More than 2,000 Sydney workers protest Labor government takeover of CFMEU

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More than 2,000 building industry workers walked off the job in Sydney Tuesday in opposition to the federal Labor government's takeover of the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

This was the third such strike rally since the Labor government placed the construction union under administration in August.

In a blatant attack on workers' democratic rights, the entire operations of the union and the capacity of workers to take legally protected industrial action to defend their jobs, wages and conditions, were placed in the hands of a quasi-dictatorial administrator, answerable only to big business and the government. Almost 300 elected officials, delegates and organisers were immediately sacked.

This was carried out under the phoney pretext of cleansing the union of rogue elements in response to unproven media allegations of corruption and links to organised crime among CFMEU officials. Labor's real aim is to drive down the wages and conditions of construction workers amid an economic downturn in that industry and more broadly.

The big-business Labor government has more in its sights than just the building industry, however. If it is allowed to succeed, the administration of the CFMEU will be used as a blueprint for future attacks against other unions and workers in every sector of the economy.

In this context, the complicity of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the majority of the country's unions, which have backed Labor's assault to the hilt, should be seen as an urgent warning for all workers. Organisations that have cheered on the disenfranchisement of 80,000 workers in one industry cannot be left in charge of defending the jobs, wages,

condition and democratic rights of workers in another.

The fight against the administration of the CFMEU is of critical importance for the entire working class, but it cannot be waged behind the leadership of these foetid organisations. This includes the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy and their allies in the other building industry unions.

The speeches at Tuesday's rally highlighted the fact that none of these can offer workers a way forward.

Ousted state CFMEU secretary Darren Greenfield attempted to play down the threat posed to wages and conditions by the administration, telling workers they were "lucky we've just done a round of EBAs [enterprise bargaining agreements]."

Despite references to the "treacherous" and "rotten" Labor Party, not a single speaker called for a political fight against it, even within the narrow framework of electoral politics.

While there was no explicit call for workers to vote for the Greens, Abigail Boyd, a member of the NSW Legislative Council, was given the platform and the party was promoted as an opponent of the administration. They voted against the legislation under conditions where Labor and the Liberal-National opposition agreed it should pass, meaning the Greens' position had no effect on the outcome.

The reality is that any supposed objection held by the Greens to the attack on the CFMEU will not prevent them from serving as a virtual coalition partner to Labor governments when their vote is actually relevant.

Multiple speakers promoted illusions in the ousted bureaucracy's forthcoming high court case against the administration. This case, in which the first hearings will be held on December 10 and 11, is nothing more than a diversion. In the unlikely event that the case succeeds, the

Labor government has already demonstrated that it will simply change the law.

Former CFMEU Committee of Management member Denis McNamara told workers, “Prepare yourselves, because if the high court challenge doesn’t go our way, we have no option but to shut this industry down.” He noted that the high court was unlikely to deliver a ruling until February or March.

The rhetoric of “shutting the industry down” has been employed at each of the rallies and has never been more than empty bluster. The difference yesterday was that it was raised in the context of an explicit promise to do nothing of the sort for at least the next three months. The instruction to workers was clear—cool your heels and pray for mercy from the bourgeois courts.

The clear aim of the ousted CFMEU leadership is to demoralise and discourage workers and suppress demands for further industrial action against the administration and a fight against Labor.

While smaller than the September 18 rally, Tuesday’s attendance was significant as workers confronted a more explicit campaign of threats, intimidation and misinformation from the CFMEU’s NSW administrators.

On Monday afternoon, workers reportedly received a text message from the union declaring, “There is no CFMEU rally tomorrow,” an obvious attempt to sow confusion. CFMEU delegates and organisers were instructed by the administrator not to attend or to allow members to use union banners or flags.

This followed a letter sent from the administrators to members last week, threatening that workers who attended the “unauthorised rally” did so “at risk of losing their job.”

The Master Builders Association (MBA), a construction industry lobby group, warned that under the draconian administration legislation, CFMEU members who participated in the rally were “risking civil penalties up to \$187,800 or even criminal penalties including 2 years imprisonment and fines up to \$939,000.”

The MBA told employers they were “not obligated to release employees for the rally,” and that “at least 4 hours’ wages must be withheld” from workers who took part.

Perhaps the most significant factor limiting attendance came from the very forces purporting to lead the fight against administration—the ousted CFMEU leadership around the country and their bureaucratic allies in other blue-collar unions.

While the two previous strikes were national events, this

time workers in Sydney marched alone, cut off from the majority of building workers. In both August and September, the rallies in Melbourne were by far the largest, involving tens of thousands of workers.

The fact that a third rally was not held in Melbourne is not an accident. The Victorian branch is now under the tight control of Zach Smith, the national secretary of the CFMEU, who has retained his highly paid job in a mark of his status as a trusted lackey of the administrator and the Labor government.

The isolation of the Sydney rally shows that Smith, with the cooperation of the other current and former union officials, is presiding over the deliberate winding down of organised opposition by workers to the administration.

To fight the dictates of the administrator and oppose further attacks on wages and conditions, workers need to take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the CFMEU or any other union, must be established in workplaces throughout the building industry and elsewhere.

These committees must plan and prepare a campaign of political and industrial action to abolish the administrator and defend pay and jobs. That requires a turn to other sections of workers for a joint struggle and a fight against the whole union apparatus which has overwhelmingly supported the administration.

This is a political fight against the Labor government, its aligned union bureaucracy and the property developers and corporations in whose interests this attack has been carried out. What is posed is the need for a socialist strategy aimed at ending the subordination of workers’ jobs, wages, conditions and democratic rights to the profit demands of the ultra-wealthy.



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