

Queensland building workers protest Liberal government attack on safety, wages and conditions

Martin Scott

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Thousands of building workers marched in Brisbane yesterday, opposing an attack by the Queensland Liberal-National government on wages, conditions and safety measures in the construction industry.

The protest came after the death last week of a worker on a Brisbane construction site. 48-year-old Brendon Stevens died in hospital days after being struck on the head by a falling piece of metal piping. Another worker was struck in the chest and hospitalised.

According to media reports, it was raining heavily at the time of the fatal incident, raising questions over why the high-risk work was proceeding, despite wet weather provisions in the industrial award.

Workers are worried that the tragic death is a sign of things to come amid a stepped-up assault by the state government.

The immediate concern of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union's (CFMEU) administrator-appointed leadership is a move by the Queensland government to require 24 hours' notice for health and safety checks.

A CFMEU spokesman told the *Courier-Mail*, "currently, we obviously have the right to access work sites to investigate safety breaches or suspected safety breaches ... the LNP [Liberal-National Party], since prior to the election, have been signalling that they [will] take that away and make a 24 hour written notice."

Of even greater consequence to workers is the state government's announcement earlier this month that it would suspend so-called Best Practice Industry Conditions (BPIC) for new major construction projects. The move threatens to drastically reduce wages and eliminate health and safety rules for building workers throughout the state.

The BPIC, negotiated between the former Labor government and several building industry unions, outlines a minimum set of wages and conditions that must be met by companies tendering for state-funded projects worth more

than \$100 million. Lead contractors are required to ensure that all subcontractors and labour hire providers also adhere to the conditions.

The BPIC also includes annual nominal pay rises of 5 percent. While scarcely higher than the official inflation rate and far short of the real rise in the cost of living, such increases are intolerable to big business, under conditions of a downturn in the construction industry and a broader economic slump.

As well as stipulating higher pay than the poverty-level industry award rates, which are barely above the national minimum wage, the BPIC contains safety measures. These include a heat policy, under which workers cannot be required to work in an area where the temperature is above 35° Celsius (95° Fahrenheit), or where the temperature is over 29°C (84.2°F) and the humidity above 75 percent.

As the tragic death of Stevens underscored, even legally mandated conditions are no guarantee of safety, unless they are enforced. This includes BPIC, which was largely an attempt to gloss over issues in the industry, and to keep a lid on anger and opposition among workers. But now, even nominal pay and safety standards are under attack, as part of a stepped-up offensive against building workers across the board.

Queensland Deputy Premier and Industrial Relations Minister Jarrod Bleijie claimed the BPIC suspension was necessary to "urgently control the cost blow-outs of government-funded construction projects," citing Treasury modelling estimating the conditions would have cost the state an extra \$17.1 billion by 2030.

While carried out by a Liberal-National state government, the scrapping of these requirements was enabled by the federal Labor government's action in August, placing the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) into administration.

The suspension of BPIC is an expression of the underlying motive behind Labor's attack on the CFMEU—to drive down

wages and conditions throughout the building industry as part of a broader assault on the working class.

Indeed, it was the BPIC specifically that the Master Builders Association of Queensland was denouncing ahead of the media campaign that led to the administration, claiming the arrangement would add 33 percent to the cost of builds in the state.

The fact that the administration is about cutting costs and boosting profits, not cleansing the construction union of alleged corruption and links to organised crime, is sharply revealed in a submission from the federal government's lawyers to an upcoming High Court case against the new laws.

It states that, while the legislation "was enacted in a context of allegations that some officers of the C&G Division 'may have engaged' in criminal conduct, its operation does not depend on the correctness of those allegations."

But it is not only the actions of the Labor government that have paved the way for the Queensland Liberal-National government to eviscerate wages, conditions and safety.

The ousted CFMEU bureaucracy, along with the leadership of the other building industry unions, has blocked any struggle by workers against the administration. Just two national protests (and a third in Sydney only) have been held, despite the strong determination to fight demonstrated by the tens of thousands of workers who attended.

CFMEU National Secretary Zach Smith, who now also runs the Victorian branch on behalf of the administrator, has promoted a "business as usual" approach, in which members proceed as if the Labor government's blatant attack on the democratic rights of a major section of the working class had never happened.

The fact is that neither Smith nor the former CFMEU bureaucrats fundamentally oppose the administration. Their sole preoccupation is to restore the position and privileges of the sacked officials, "earned" through years of service suppressing the workers' struggles for wages and conditions.

This is why not a single strike or protest was called in the six weeks before the legislation was passed, with Smith and other bureaucrats instead engaging in backroom manoeuvres

Now, the current and former union officials, with the ousted Queensland CFMEU leaders at the forefront, are telling workers that the administration can be defeated through the High Court case. But even in the unlikely event that the case is successful, the federal Labor government has made clear that it will just change the law again.

The legal challenge is a diversion, intended to placate workers and prevent a serious struggle against Labor. It has

been used as a pretext to completely shut down mass protests that involved tens of thousands of workers who were furious over the attack carried out against them by Labor with the full support of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

These workers have been forced to the sidelines, told there is nothing they can do but wait until the High Court hands down a ruling in February or March.

The Queensland government's escalation of the attack on building workers, including the suspension of BPIC, is a stark illustration of why the administration of the CFMEU must be fought, as a matter of urgency for the entire working class.

But the events of the past four months show that such a fight cannot be waged behind the leadership of the ousted CFMEU bureaucrats or the other building unions.

To fight the dictates of the administrator and oppose further attacks on wages, conditions and safety, 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 entire political establishment, including Labor and the unions, as well as 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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