

Australian Services Union rally organisers promote illusions in Labor

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Several hundred social welfare, community and home care and disability service (SCHADS) workers joined rallies in Australian states on Thursday to demand the Fair Work Commission (FWC) withdraw its proposals for a major restructure of the SCHADS Award, which sets out minimum wages and conditions for the sector (see interviews).

The Australian Services Union (ASU) has rejected the FWC's recommendations, which were released in April and developed as part of a long-running "Gender Undervaluation—Priority Awards Review." The union estimates that 70 percent of employees would face reduced pay under the proposal. Some higher-level employees, it says, could be paid hundreds of dollars less per week.

Promoted as a "National Day of Action," the protests were not strikes but "own-time" events, involving about 500 workers in Melbourne and up to 300 in Sydney, with smaller gatherings in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. This is a tiny fraction of the ASU's membership covered by the SCHADS Awards and the more than 175,000 workers in the sector. The central purpose of the ASU's demonstrations was to politically disarm SCHADS workers by promoting illusions in the federal and state Labor governments.

The rallies were called a week before the FWC resumes hearings on its award "reform" recommendations and amid calls by the Australia Industry Group (AiG), one of the country's dominant business lobby groups, for an even harsher version of the plan, including the elimination of "sleepover" rates and other hard-won conditions.

On October 15, AiG called on the FWC to consider prosecuting the union and its officials for calling the demonstrations, which it claimed constituted "intimidation" and should incur heavy fines and even jail terms.

While protesting rank-and-file ASU members were not

daunted by these threats, and made clear their determination to fight, the rallies were stage-managed affairs aimed at containing members' opposition, keeping them isolated from other sections of the working class and tied to the FWC.

Senior union bureaucrats constantly insisted that federal and state Labor governments were backing the union, falsely claiming that Labor had been an unwavering fighter for equal pay in the social welfare sector over decades.

Remarkably, none of the full-time union officials speaking at the Sydney rally mentioned AiG's menacing threats against the ASU or its political implications for ASU members and any other section of the working class protesting future FWC rulings.

Addressing the Melbourne rally, ASU national secretary Emeline Gaske did reference the AiG's threats, denouncing the big-business lobby as "awful ghouls who want to lock us up for defending our rights to equal pay. This is a direct assault on the people who form the backbone of our communities," she said.

Notwithstanding Gaske's demagoguery, she and other speakers proposed no future action to fight these threats, but appealed to the FWC to "listen to the evidence and work with us to build a system that values rather than punishes these essential workers."

While no date has been announced for a final ruling, the FWC on Monday categorically rejected calls by the ASU and various welfare agencies for the proposal to be abandoned.

Not a single speaker at the Sydney and Melbourne events criticised Labor's political record. Everything was done to deflect attention from Labor's refusals to adequately fund social welfare and other basic programs to alleviate poverty, homelessness, youth unemployment and other social ills created by the deepening cost-of-living crisis confronting tens of thousands of working-

class families, which Labor has overseen.

New South Wales (NSW) Labor Senator Tony Sheldon, a former Transport Workers Union national secretary, was welcomed at the Sydney rally, while in Melbourne, Victorian Labor Senator Lisa Darmanin, a former Victorian secretary of the Australian Services Union, was the featured speaker.

Darmanin spent almost two decades in the ASU leadership before being selected by the Labor Party machine as a Senate candidate last year and elected this year. She told the rally that, in 2012, the ASU had forced the Labor government to grant the union's demands for equal pay for women and "fund our work appropriately."

"Our government supports addressing gender undervaluation in this industry and closing the gender pay gap and I will not accept workers' wages going backwards and will back you every step in this fight," she said.

No references were made to Labor's attacks—past and present—on public sector workers' wages and conditions, or the Albanese government's complete takeover of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union and associated anti-democratic attacks on its members.

ASU members also were expected to forget about Victorian and NSW Labor government attacks on health workers, imposing sub-inflation pay caps and refusing to provide the desperately needed funds to overcome dangerous understaffing in public hospitals. NSW health workers have been viciously attacked by the Minns government, which the ASU now claims supports its opposition to the FWC's award reform.

Labor's so-called "commitment" to gender equality is a diversion. While there is gender pay inequality, exclusive focus on this issue is used, especially by the union bureaucracies, to divide workers, covering up the reality that the pay gap is a class question. This can only be fought as part of a unified movement of the working class against the underfunding of health and community services by Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments alike.

The Albanese government, moreover, has made clear that its attitude towards the FWC's proposals should be based on a "fiscally and economically responsible" approach—i.e., serve the interests of Australia's economic elites—combined with concerns that the FWC proposals may result in disruptive industrial disputation.

Thursday's rallies, which did not present proposals about future action or allow any discussion or resolutions from rank-and-file members, provided no way forward.

In order to defend their wages and hard-won conditions, ASU members need to organise independently of the ASU and its bureaucratic apparatus, which is an inseparable part of Labor's political machinery that, like the rest of the unions, systematically imposes its big-business agenda.

This means mean forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace and linking up with SCHADS workers nationally, including those covered by the Australian Workers Union, Health Services Union, Community and Public Sector Union or United Workers Union, as well as non-union members. Such committees should be the venue for workers to democratically discuss demands based on what they actually need, not what the FWC, the government and the unions say is "affordable."

This should include immediate pay rises of at least 30 percent across the board for SCHADS workers, the abolition of all remaining gender pay inequalities and billions of dollars allocated to the seriously underfunded sector to provide high-quality care for all who need it.

These necessary demands are inseparable from the fight for a socialist perspective and a workers' government that places the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control and invests billions of dollars in every area of social need.

We urge SCHADS workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the formation of rank-and file committees and the development of a genuine struggle for increased pay, improved staffing and safe working conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact