

Australian local government workers at strike rally speak against pay cuts and worsening conditions

Our reporters
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More than 1,000 workers—including garbage collectors, street cleaners, librarians, social workers, gardeners and administrative workers—from eight local council areas participated in a strike rally on May 5 in a dispute over pay and conditions. Read the *World Socialist Web Site's* analysis of the strike rally here.

A WSWS reporting team spoke to rallying workers, many of whom were attending their first strike, or their first in decades.

“I think we’re deserving of a rebalancing of our pay and conditions, considering the cost of living,” said **Alex** who has been an IT worker for 3 years at the Hobson’s Bay Council in Melbourne’s southwest. “Everyone feels it. Inflation’s up heaps. Everything becomes more expensive. We have not had a decent raise in four years. We feel the effects strongly. It’s the reason we’re out here.

“We’ve lagged behind, and we ought to take that back into balance. Aside from pay, we’ve put forth a number of other conditions, including changes to our leave, changes to minimum hours for casual staff, changes to the disciplinary clauses.”

Craig, from Yarra City Council in the inner north, told the WSWS: “We’re the people who are the backbone of the community. We’re the people who look after people. We run the childcare centres. We’re trying to save families and they’re screwing us over with this dodgy pay deal.

“There’s been over a hundred people leave Yarra in the last few years so we’re doing other people’s jobs. We’ve been spread thinly to do other people’s jobs. We’re doing so much extra work now. ... We need a wage rise, we need better conditions and we need people and resources to assist us in just doing our job.

“I have a family, I’ve got kids to send to school.

There’s things that we used to do that we can’t do anymore financially. We can’t save for a house. That’s just gone.”

City of Melbourne librarian, **Brenda**, said she thought the strike was “exciting and historic.”

“The Labor governments are disappointing. They haven’t done well on so many things, like the federal government on refugees and the state government just wants to stay in power.

“They’re trying to get libraries to be more like social areas. But we’re trained for one thing. We can only do so much in the social work area because we’re not trained. The homeless are the first people in every morning and the last people out every night. We do have a social worker, but we need more than one in the library. It’s quite full on. They normally stay a few years and then leave.”

Fred works in garbage collection for the Hume Council, which encompasses Melbourne’s northern working-class suburbs.

He told the WSWS: “Two weeks ago they brought contractors in to do our work when we went on strike and paid them \$300 per hour for each truck. We worked it out that if they spent that to give us the 10 percent that we’re asking for it would probably cover it. It’s pretty disgusting what’s happening with Hume Council right now. Higher management are getting a 20 percent pay rise. They brought that forward from 2029 to 2026.

“The enterprise agreement expired in June last year. We took a big cut last agreement. They came back to us and said we can’t afford it. They went on the CPI [Consumer Price Index], which was only 1.5 percent and that’s what we ended up getting. Then six months later CPI went up to 5.6 percent.”

Michael, a planning compliance officer from

Maribyrnong Council, said: “The cost of living brought me out, it’s what most people are here for. Our wages haven’t kept up. I’ve been in council since 2005, at a number of councils. We’ve been cut for years and years. But what we’ve seen is, with inflation, both the CPI and the GPI, which is a more accurate way of measuring the economy, are going up and have been for years.

“My pay has gone down 12 percent since 2021. That’s a sharp fall, not a minor fall. Since the economic uncertainty prompted by COVID, it hasn’t improved. So now we’re forced here today to vent our frustrations.”

“It’s hitting me in the bills and at the grocery store as well,” Michael said, speaking of the cost-of-living crisis. “Our tax system’s broken. It only caters for the 1 percent. We’ve got a government that’s not adhering to workers’ needs. The teachers, I think, are even worse off than we are. They’re on strike too, and I support them.”

The worker linked falling wages and cuts to public services to the funnelling of resources into militarism.

“The western powers’ oppression of the Middle East has had a detrimental effect on where we are today, and it goes back decades. You have a lot of American and European corporate interests in the region. I think Donald Trump has completely miscalculated this assault on Iran. He thought he could take over. I’ve actually lived in Iran and they’re not a rogue third-world state. All the world’s economies are affected by this war. The fuel prices are skyrocketing because of it, and also because of the war in Ukraine.

“Labor is supplying critical parts of jet fighter planes that service Israel. They should stop supplying aid to Israel. These wars, Gaza and Iran, are not about religion. They’re about America and Benjamin Netanyahu and his extreme right-wing fascists that are wrecking the Middle East. Trump wants to be a dictator. Israel’s workers have got to rise up and stop that party from ruling their country.”

Michelle, a librarian from City of Melbourne council, said: “The inequity in the pay scale is huge in councils. At the City of Melbourne council, the CEO gets more pay than the Victorian Premier and they can’t even give us a pay rise. It doesn’t make sense. There should be a decent pay increase.”

Michelle expressed support for teachers and agreed with a united struggle of workers across industries.

“The more workers that can unite together, the more we can show the people in power that we count, that we have a voice and systems wouldn’t run without us. We are cogs in the wheel of society, cogs that make everything

run.”

She also spoke against the imperialist war on Iran.

“Trump should back off. This war is just going to get worse and it’s going to hurt more people. And not just in Iran but all around the world. The people on the bottom, that’s who it’s going to hurt.

“The Australian government is making parts for the bombs and all the war machinery. So, they actually are working towards the war. They might say they’re not, but they are. And the amount we pay into the military is ridiculous. It should be going into the children. We should definitely start at the bottom and work up. And health and social services. There should be way more put into mental health. I think society needs a change, a big change.”

Sue, a social worker at Darebin Council in the city’s north, said: “Management says they’re negotiating but there are no real concrete outcomes so far. My last official pay rise was in 2024 at 2.33 percent.

“It’s about social inequality in society at the moment overall, where regular working people are not making enough money to survive. And that’s why I’ve come out to this rally. ... It has to do with distribution of money and where the government is spending money and they value military spending more than spending on people.”

Frances, a parks maintenance worker from Merri-bek council, said, “I’m here for better pay, better conditions, supporting all my co-workers. I actually moved here from New Zealand to make more money, but everything’s so expensive here too: rent, petrol, everything. And with me, I live relatively frugally, I don’t have any dependents, I don’t have big bills. But my co-workers here have children, mortgages they’re trying to pay off, and with these wages they can’t pay for anything.”

Frances agreed that workers internationally are seeing the degradation of their living standards, as capitalism is plunging into world war.

“You’re totally on the money. Society is too top-heavy at the moment. Inequality is terrible. And with the war on Iran, taxpayers are being forced to pay for it. But the taxpayers don’t want war. It’s stupid.”



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