Australia: Melbourne council workers speak out against real wage cuts, Labor and war

Our reporters
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Last week, more than 1,000 workers from eight Melbourne councils met to vote on the next steps in their long-running fight against further real wage cuts.

The employers have offered workers a nominal pay rise of just 2.75 percent, far below the current inflation rate of 4.3 percent. The meeting was a damning exposure of the Australian Services Union, which pressured workers to lower their own wage demand in the most anti-democratic fashion. Click here for full coverage of the meeting.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to workers outside the meeting.

Dave, a garbage truck driver at Merri-bek Council, described the consequences of plummeting real wages amid a cost-of-living crisis: “I’ve had to sell my unit. As far as surviving goes, I was doing it hard. Too many outlays. I just couldn’t keep on top of it. I’ve had to shift back home with my mum at the moment, unfortunately.”

Paid just over $2,000 a fortnight, he said, “after bills and just trying to run a car with the cost of fuel, I’m left with not much at all. I can’t even have a holiday.” He had hoped to keep the unit for retirement, but “I’ve had to make the harsh choice and shift back home. It doesn’t seem like it’s getting any better, does it?”

“2.75 percent is a wage cut. We are going backwards,” Dave said. “To survive, pretty much it was either live like a pauper and struggle from week to week, or shift in with your mother.”

Driving his truck, he sees signs of the social crisis spreading: “It’s phenomenal the amount of times you’re seeing people who have basically been kicked out of their homes. You see more and more stuff going out on the nature strip—furniture and things. People are just being forced out and becoming homeless.”

Dave, a lifelong Labor voter, said this year was “the first year that’s got me thinking about voting elsewhere.”

Julian, an infrastructure worker at Maribyrnong Council with eight years’ service, called the 2.75 percent offer “a pretty poor effort,” compared with inflation.

Meanwhile, he said, “Management is sort of organising their own pay increases, so really, they can sit on it as long as they feel like. It’s no skin off their nose.” He believed the councils were deliberately dragging out negotiations to put more pressure on workers.

At the same time as trying to impose deepening wage cuts, councils are slashing spending. Julian said the capital works program had “been cut to the bare bones already,” pointing to “the state of the roads—I wouldn’t want it any worse than it is.”

Julian agreed that struggles of different sections of workers need to be linked up, saying “the action needs to get stronger.”

Scott, who works in open space at Merri-bek Council, with 20 years experience across three councils, was blunt: “The pay rise is absolutely pitiful. [Management] always say that we’re ‘one,’ but when it comes time for wage increases, we’re not ‘one.’ The divide comes really quick.” The councils, he said, “don’t care about their workers. We’re just a number.”

Scott said the Labor Party had “definitely lost their way with the normal worker” and that he would not vote for them again.

Shuwei, who has worked for nearly 20 years at Darebin council, called the 2.75 percent offer “disgusting.”

She said: “They’ve never had money for fair wages, and it’s getting worse, and a lot of us are suffering due to cost of living pressures.

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“The councils do have enough money. They just divert it to other priorities.”

Asked what was driving the attack on wages across health, education and local government, she answered directly: “It’s due to capitalism, a small percentage of people wanting to make a lot of money at the expense of the rest of us.

“I don’t support Labor. I support a socialist movement.”

Danielle, an early childhood educator, said the offer was “insulting.” “We work very hard, and we deserve to be paid more for what we’re doing.” She noted that she was managing only because of her savings. “But for people who don’t have money behind them, young people, it’s very hard.”

Danielle said Labor was “letting us down now. They’re not doing what they promise. They’re not helping the working people at all. They’re just paying their mates... Labor’s not the same anymore.”

Danielle said the government should be “putting money into what’s important, not the war machine.”

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