Australia: Union pressures council workers to lower wage demand

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More than 1,000 workers from eight Melbourne councils packed a mass union meeting on Wednesday, November 4, to vote on the next steps in their struggle against further real wage cuts.

But their determination to fight collided head-on with an Australian Services Union (ASU) bureaucracy intent on imposing a sellout.

The councils' offer of a nominal 2.75 percent pay increase from January 2027 is a savage real wage cut, coming on top of years in which council workers' pay has fallen as much as 12 percent compared with inflation.

The dispute involves garbage collectors, librarians, road workers, early childhood educators, home care workers and other employees from Darebin, Greater Dandenong, Hobsons Bay, Hume, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Merri-bek and Yarra.

Workers at each council are covered by separate enterprise agreements, but are engaging in multi-employer bargaining, with common negotiations for certain core demands and separate negotiations over council-specific conditions.

Their previous enterprise agreement expired in July 2025, but for most of that time, the ASU leadership has restricted industrial action to sporadic work bans, isolated to specific workforces within individual councils. There have been just three eight-council strikes, in May, June and July after an initial rubbish collection strike in April, with further stoppages in October limited to Hume and Merri-bek.

Waste collection workers across three councils stopped work for 24 hours in April, and the following month more than 1,000 workers struck and rallied outside Parliament. In June, another one-day mass strike was held, closing libraries and halting waste services. In July, workers across all eight councils downed tools for four hours.

In the lead-up to the November 28 state election, the dispute poses political questions extending well beyond negotiations with individual councils. The assault on council workers' wages and conditions is part of a broader offensive spearheaded by the state and federal Labor governments. Workers who provide essential services are being told to accept declining living standards while public services are starved of resources.

The ASU's performative criticisms of Labor during the election campaign have not altered its role in enforcing this austerity agenda. In response to growing opposition among workers to Labor, the union bureaucracy is promoting illusions in the Greens and the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists.

That is effectively support for Labor one degree removed. The Greens, themselves a capitalist party, collaborate closely with Labor, while VS is peddling the fraud that a "better, fairer Victoria" can be achieved through a state parliament whose main parties are committed to sweeping austerity.

The bureaucracy's political isolation of the council workers' dispute was on stark display at the mass meeting, in which the election was barely mentioned, and no connection was made with the bitter struggles of whole swathes of Victorian public sector workers, including health workers and educators, against the Labor government's cuts in recent months and years.

Instead, the ASU's criticism of Labor is limited to accusations of "broken promises" and demands that the government lift the cap on council rate rises—effectively pleading on behalf of the employers to be allowed to extract a greater sum from homeowners.

Last week's mass meeting was not held to discuss the councils' real wage cutting offer of 2.75 percent per annum pay rises—workers had already rejected that decisively. Nor was it held to discuss how they will take forward their campaign through strikes and other industrial action—none of which were mentioned. The purpose of the meeting was to get a phoney stamp of workers' approval on the ASU bureaucracy's plan to lower its wage claim and proceed with backroom negotiations.

Workers had previously endorsed a wage demand of 22 percent—10 percent backdated to 2025, followed by 4 percent in each of the next three years. Even this would have been woefully inadequate to make up for losses incurred in previous union-brokered agreements, and keep with soaring

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inflation, currently at 4.3 percent officially.

But the union bureaucracy's motions to the meeting last week were to pressure workers into abandoning the existing claim and adopting a reduced demand.

The first motion sought approval to depart from the endorsed 10/4/4/4 position. Majorities at five councils supported it, but workers at Hume, Melbourne and Merri-bek voted against, meaning they wanted to keep fighting for the original claim.

Officials proceeded to Motion 2, offering three alternative pay demands: 8/4/4/4, 7/7/4/4 and 7/4/4/4. Workers overwhelmingly voted for the second option—7 percent in 2025 and 2026, followed by 4 percent in 2027 and 2028.

The very structure of this vote was a trap, with every selection a retreat from the endorsed claim. The "choice" was between giving up more and giving up less.

The union officials then returned to the first motion. Declaring "we can't allow there to be division," they demanded a re-vote by the three groups of workers who had rejected lowering the demand.

Under pressure from this blatantly anti-democratic attempt to coerce dissenting workers to reverse their votes, workers from Hume and Melbourne councils succumbed, while Merri-bek again voted against the motion. They were not forced to vote for a third time, but a clear message had been sent to workers at all eight councils: what the union bureaucracy says goes.

Clearly seeking to head off opposition to this railroading operation, the ASU fraudulently celebrated the meeting on social media as a shining example of "member-led union democracy."

Aside from the concession motions, the main content of the meeting was a presentation from Maurice Blackburn lawyers on legal obstacles to extending the multi-employer bargaining authorisation before the Fair Work Commission (FWC). The emphasis was that workers must toe the line of Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, or risk being stripped of the already limited right to take action together across the eight councils.

The chilling effect was deliberate. After months of mass rallies, strikes and work bans, the line put by the officials was that the way forward lay not in further industrial action, but in backroom bargaining and appeals to the FWC.

Sharp conclusions must be drawn from the mass meeting: Workers are clearly determined to fight, but the ASU bureaucracy is actively working to sabotage them and push through a sellout, resorting to blatantly anti-democratic means to provide the pretext that this is "what workers voted for."

The issues confronting Melbourne council workers will not be resolved through the wheeling and dealing negotiations of union bureaucrats or through pseudo-legal proceedings in the anti-worker FWC. But nor will they be resolved through an industrial struggle confined to the level of local councils.

Council workers confront the same fundamental issues as teachers, health workers, university staff and other sections of the working class: Declining living standards, intolerable workloads and the destruction of public services.

They are all up against a state Labor government that has, for more than a decade, imposed real wage cuts and slashed social spending. Virtually every part of the public sector has been involved in bitter and protracted disputes over the past several years, all against the same Labor government, and all fragmented and isolated by their respective union bureaucracies.

Their common interests demand a unified struggle against Labor. But this is antithetical to the union bureaucracy, which remains tied to Labor by a thousand threads, however much the bureaucrats try to cover this over with minor criticisms.

Council workers need to build their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to take matters into their own hands and link up their struggles with those of teachers, health workers and others across Victoria and more broadly.

This is perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its candidates in the Victorian election, Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne, who are standing for the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Legislative Council.

The SEP fights for a workers' government and the reorganisation of society's resources under democratic control, to meet human needs rather than the demands of corporate profit and militarism.

The task is to build a revolutionary movement of the working class, in Australia and internationally, against the capitalist system. Breaking the grip of the Labor and union apparatuses through the construction of rank-and-file organisations is an essential component of that struggle.

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