

Australia: Tens of thousands of construction workers protest Labor government attack

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Tens of thousands of building industry workers rallied across Australia on Tuesday, protesting the federal Labor government's assault on the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), which has been placed under administration.

State control over a large section of workers has been imposed with extraordinary speed, in a massive attack on democratic rights. Sketchy claims of union corruption, broadcast in the corporate media and entirely untested, are clearly only a pretext for a measure aimed at disciplining a militant and significant section of the working class.

The largest rally was in Melbourne, where some 40,000 workers took part, while protests in Sydney, Brisbane and other major cities numbered in the thousands.

The mass rallies highlighted the determination of workers to fight a sweeping attack on their democratic rights that is ultimately directed at slashing wages and conditions. They also expressed mounting hostility among the working class to the Labor Party, amid a deepening cost-of-living and social crisis.

But the demonstrations also exposed the complete bankruptcy of the ousted CFMEU leadership, which has no perspective to fight the administration or the Labor government that ordered it and no plan to mobilise workers against them.

In even attending the rallies, workers defied threats, censorship and isolation by the political establishment and the union apparatus. Under draconian Fair Work industrial legislation, the walk-offs and rally were essentially illegal.

That was emphasised by the Labor government, which threatened workers with repercussions if they walked off the job to attend the rallies. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese warned Tuesday morning: "If there is unprotected industrial action, then there are consequences for that."

Albanese repeated the infamous catch-phrase of arch-conservative, anti-working class British Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, declaring, "the government is not for turning."

This followed a statement from the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) Monday, that employers were required to dock workers at least four hours' pay if they walked off the job to attend the rallies.

Social media posts advertising the demonstrations in Sydney

and Melbourne were quickly taken down from the CFMEU's official accounts as one of the first acts of the administrator.

Almost all unions in the country boycotted the rallies. Along with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), they have lined up in full support of Labor's anti-democratic moves against construction workers and the CFMEU. Only a handful of unions, including the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which is the maritime division of the CFMEU, promoted and encouraged members to join the demonstrations.

The protests showed that workers are furious over Labor's attempt to neuter the CFMEU's construction division and see it as part of a broader attack on the working class.

Ben, who has worked in the building industry for 30 years, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at the Melbourne rally: "What is happening to the CFMEU can happen and will happen to other Australian unions."

Another worker, **Anthony**, said "We need to look outside Labor to find affiliations. A break with the ALP should be an option."

Bruce, a worker at the rally, asked: "What have Labor and Liberal done for us in the last decade? Things should have gotten better in the last 50 years, not worse. I agree, we need a revolution."

Speakers to the rallies, most of whom were leading figures in the recently deposed CFMEU bureaucracy, acknowledged this opposition to Labor only in the form of demagoguery.

In Sydney, ousted CFMEU NSW secretary Darren Greenfield denounced the "rotten, stinking Labor Party," and vowed, "next election, we're gonna vote these bastards out." Rob Kera, his second-in-charge, declared "We're gonna campaign for the absolute destruction of the Labor Party."

This is so much bluster and hyperbole. Whether Labor is voted out at the next election or not, the union leadership's main aim is to ensure the rightful anger and hostility to the Labor government's assault is confined within the straitjacket of the parliamentary process. Within this anti-democratic and pro-business framework, the only alternative to the anti-working class program of Labor that can result from an election is the equally right-wing program of the Coalition government.

At the Brisbane rally, Greens member of parliament Max

Chandler-Mather was given the platform. He declared: “This is an attack not just on construction workers but on every worker in this country because Labor has set a dangerous precedent.”

He outlined no way to fight the measure, however. Nor did he explain why the Greens continue to collaborate with the Labor government and aspire to some sort of power-sharing arrangement after the next election. The Greens are a capitalist party of the upper-middle class. Their posturing on this issue, as with their rhetorical condemnations of the Gaza genocide, are aimed at channelling discontent back behind the parliamentary set-up.

Denis McNamara, introduced as a “rank and filer,” but in fact a member of the union’s committee of management until he was removed on Friday, said, “These politicians and [ACTU secretary] Sally McManus ... will be remembered as traitors of the working class.”

None of the speakers offered any explanation for the unprecedented attack by Labor or its support by the ACTU, both of which were presented as coming totally out of the blue.

CFMEU NSW President Rita Mallia made passing reference to the “very clear agenda of the Master Builders Association” to target “your pay rises.” But she insisted the “unholy alliance between Labor, the ACTU and the Liberal Party to crush this mighty union” had come “without any warning, without notice.”

This is a fraud. The CFMEU bureaucracy has been an integral part of Labor for decades, channeling millions of dollars of members’ dues to the party and promoting it in one election after another. The union aggressively campaigned for Labor in the 2022 election, and is thus directly responsible for the right-wing program Albanese has implemented, including the assault on workers’ rights, wages and conditions.

The ousted CFMEU leadership is promoting the illusion that this pro-business assault is an aberration or something unexpected, both to cover over its own filthy record and to divert workers from the conclusion that a political alternative is required.

At the Melbourne rally, a resolution was passed that the CFMEU officials who are no longer allowed to represent their members in the workplace should retain their positions in the leadership of the industry superannuation funds jointly controlled by the union and major corporations.

This exposes the real agenda of the CFMEU apparatus. Firstly the rallies were called only after the administration was imposed. They did not lift a finger against Labor’s assault—not one strike action was organised. Instead, behind closed doors, they engaged in backroom negotiations with the FWC to organise the administration of the union’s branches, with the main perspective of preserving their own positions.

Only after they were officially cut out of the industrial relations framework when the legislation was pushed through parliament, leaving them with no other option, did these bureaucrats look to their membership to restore their own

lucrative positions.

Tuesday’s rallies were not called to build opposition to the Labor government, but to contain it. Stripped of their titles, but still inextricably tied to Labor and the union apparatus, the ousted CFMEU leaders are terrified that workers’ opposition will bypass them.

This was expressed in the declaration by Kera that the “elected leaders will remain leadership in exile,” and Greenfield’s appeal for workers to “stay with us—we’re only getting warmed up.”

But staying with the now “exiled” CFMEU bureaucracy, which has tied workers to Labor, the ACTU and the Fair Work framework, is what has led to the situation construction workers now confront.

To fight the dictates of the administrator, and oppose further attacks on wages and conditions, workers need democratic organisations of their own. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the CFMEU or any other union, must be established in workplaces throughout the construction industry and more broadly.

These committees must prepare a concerted 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, which can only occur in opposition to the union bureaucracy as a whole, which has overwhelmingly supported the administration.

This is a political fight against the Labor government, its aligned union bureaucracy and the property developers and corporations, at whose behest this attack has been carried out. Above all, what is posed is the need for a socialist strategy, directed against the subordination of construction and every other industry to the profit demands of the ultra-wealthy.



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