

Australia: Building workers hold second round of mass protests against Labor government attack

Martin Scott

18 September 2024

Tens of thousands of building industry workers walked off the job yesterday, carrying out mass rallies in Melbourne and Sydney. Hundreds of construction workers also rallied in Brisbane on Tuesday.

They were protesting the federal Labor government's imposition of an administrator to run the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU).

Labor's move, placing one of the largest industrial unions in the country under state control, is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of its 80,000 members, whose elected leaders have been replaced by a quasi-dictator.

This has been carried out under the fraudulent pretext of cleaning up the construction union, on the basis of unproven media allegations of corruption and links to organised crime. But the real target of the administration is the wages and conditions of construction workers and the working class as a whole.

The rallies this week followed mass protests around the country on August 27, and again show that there is mass opposition to the administration. The developing movement expressed broader hostility in the working class to the Labor government, amid a deepening cost-of-living and social crisis.

Workers also voiced their anger over the complicity of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which, along with most unions in the country, has fully endorsed Labor's attack on the CFMEU.

But what was clear at the demonstrations, expressed even more starkly than on August 27, is that neither the ousted CFMEU bureaucracy, nor the leadership of the other building unions, has a perspective through which workers can take their struggle forward.

In Sydney, even the empty bluster against Labor, which in August included rhetorical calls for the "total destruction" of the government, took a more muted form, with vague threats that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and New South Wales Premier Chris Minns would only serve "one term."

Zach Smith, national secretary of the CFMEU, essentially told the crowd of around 25,000 workers in Melbourne that his

plan was to continue with business as usual.

"We are going to sign a thousand EBAs [enterprise bargaining agreements] in the next 12 months, here in Victoria," under a joint building unions' campaign, Smith said.

"We're not going to take a backwards step. We are not going to let administration mean that any worker goes backwards, loses hard-won wages and conditions. We will stand together, we will come out of this period, and we'll be stronger than ever," Smith declared.

In other words, Smith was telling workers there is no need to fight the administration, much less the Labor government or the ACTU.

The conception that construction workers can fight against attacks on their wages and conditions within the existing industrial relations framework, while their every move is subject to the approval of an administrator who answers only to the capitalist state, is a total lie.

As union speakers at the Sydney rally outlined, some companies are already insisting that they will negotiate only with the administrator, not elected bargaining representatives. Other major building corporations have sought to tear up agreements already voted on by workers, clearly confident of striking a more favourable deal now that construction workers' hands are tied.

Smith claimed the building unions were drawing a "line in the sand," which "means that politicians and parliaments will not take our conditions backwards either, or introduce draconian anti-worker laws."

This too is a fraud. Not a single strike was called, by the leadership of the CFMEU or any other union, in the six weeks between the Labor government's initial threat to impose administration and the passage of the legislation.

Instead, the CFMEU bosses engaged in a series of backroom negotiations, with the Labor government, the ACTU and the Fair Work Commission, aimed at implementing the administration in a way that allowed the construction union bureaucrats to hold on to their seat at the table.

Smith's comments, along with his conduct over the past two months, underscore that he has not at any stage actually

opposed the state takeover of the construction union, and does not now. It is no coincidence that Smith, a member of the Labor Party's national executive, is one of just a few CFMEU leaders to have held on to their highly compensated offices.

Smith's new role, as the right-hand man of a state-appointed dictator, is the envy of all the sacked CFMEU bureaucrats. Their opposition to Labor's latest "draconian anti-worker laws" begins and ends with the restoration of their well-paid positions and privileges.

This was underscored by union speakers at the Sydney rally, in repeated declarations that the fight will continue until the ousted leaders "are back in their rightfully elected positions."

The reality is that these positions and privileges are the reward for decades of service as an industrial police force, suppressing the class struggle and delivering on the demands of corporations and governments.

A key component of this has been their enforcement of every other "draconian anti-worker law" introduced by Labor over the past four decades, including the 2009 Fair Work Act, which criminalises strikes and other industrial action, except during narrow enterprise bargaining windows.

None of the speakers outlined a plan of action for workers to fight the administration. Instead there were vague references to the possibility of future rallies, including a hypothetical 72-hour strike, and a call for workers in those many unions that have supported Labor's attack on the CFMEU to appeal to their leaders to shift.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is advancing a perspective through which construction workers, and the working class more broadly, can defeat this attack. SEP campaigners attended the Sydney and Melbourne rallies, speaking to striking workers and distributing copies of the party's statement, "Build rank-and-file committees on building sites! End the Labor government's CFMEU administration, defend wages and conditions!"

In opposition to the line put forward by union speakers, the statement declares:

The Labor government's attack on workplace rights is in line with its broader efforts to criminalise and suppress protests, as was starkly displayed in last week's violent police attacks on anti-war protesters in Melbourne.

This underscores the need for a unified political struggle by the working class, not just against Labor, but the capitalist system and its subordination of every aspect of workers' lives to the profits of the financial and corporate elite.

Such a struggle is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus which is not just intimately tied to, but an integral part of, Labor and the political establishment.

To take forward such a fight, workers need new organisations of struggle. Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers and politically and organisationally independent of any union, must be built in workplaces across the country.

Above all, what is posed is the need to fight for a workers' government and for socialism.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at the Melbourne rally.

Mark said of the administration legislation, "They're the worst laws that have ever been passed by a Parliament against a working-class union."

Referring to the significance of Labor attacking a historically militant section of workers, he said: "They've taken out the tip of the spear, us being the most powerful union in the country. They know that they can't affect anyone's wages until they take us out first. They've really gone for the head of the snake with us."

Hamish, a CFMEU delegate who has worked as a rigger and now serves as a health and safety representative (HSR), spoke about the dire safety conditions that exist in the building industry.

He said: "Every day, shop stewards are going around pulling up immediate risks to health and safety that the bosses turn a blind eye to. The power of an HSR means we can do this.

"Unfortunately, the safety people inside the companies, from the tier-one job sites all the way down to the low ones, as soon as they're any good at their job, they're gone. They can't speak up, they've got no power. They have to do what the boss says.

"The ACTU have got no fight; they've left all their workers with crap pay increases, and now we look like the baddies because we've got fair rates. They're not bringing anyone up from the lower classes. Now you can't even survive on the basic wage that the ACTU have advocated for.

"The Labor Party have lost their way. They don't understand where they came from and now they're just like the Coalition government.

"The 'left faction' of the bloody Labor Party is still right wing. There's no socialist left in Labor."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact