

Parliament stormed as austerity budget hits workers, students and Aboriginals

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On 19 August the Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) called a demonstration outside Parliament in the federal capital Canberra to protest at the new government's massive budget cuts and proposed new anti-trade unions laws. What the bureaucrats planned was a routine speechfest but the demonstrators had other ideas. Comrades from Workers Power (Australia) were there. Peter Main explores the background to the current attacks and the prospects for a strong working class response.

Less than six months after its sweeping election victory, Australia's right wing Liberal/National coalition government has unveiled its plans for an all out attack on the working class. The immediate thrust of the offensive is the 'breakthrough budget' presented by Finance Minister Peter Costello on 20 August.

This will force through \$A4 billion (approximately £2 billion) worth of cuts in public spending this year and a further \$A3 to \$A4 billion the next year. These include \$A1.8 billion from tertiary education, \$A1.5 billion from employment programmes, \$A570 million from spending on the elderly and a complete end to all public spending on dental care. Workers won't be able to bite, but the cuts sure will!

In the public sector this will mean thousands of jobs being slashed, as well as services for millions disappearing. In education the cuts could mean up to 21,000 student places being lost, depriving working class youth of the chance of higher education.

The coalition was elected on promises that the sale of public assets, like the state telecom company Telstra, would be used to finance improved public services. This sounds good on election hustings, but it was nothing more than a lie to conceal the attack on those very public services.

Divide and rule

As with Chirac in France, reality has not been long in coming. But the Premier, John Howard, has done his homework and hopes to avoid the kind of mass strike response that hit France last December.

As well as the budget proposals, the Coalition has brought in a range of measures which are intended to divide any potential counter-attack and to whip up reactionary racist support for the government. There are to be \$A400 million cuts in programmes that support Aboriginal interests, a campaign against 'dole fraud' and the introduction of a 'youth payment' to replace the dole or grants for those under 21.

Racism is a key part of Howard's gameplan. Aboriginal land rights, immigrant and positive discrimination legislation have long been targeted by right wing MPs. Now they are all under direct attack from Howard's legislative programme.

Important as these attacks are, they will not bring about the fundamental shift of power and wealth to the capitalists which the government is aiming. For that, they need to cripple the basic organisations of the

workers?the trade unions.

Anti-union laws

After 13 years of a Labour government that cut living standards by 10% through backroom deals with the union leaders, the Australian unions are not as strong as once they were. But, as the events in Canberra show, they are very far from being beaten. Important strikes in car manufacturing, oil refining, coal mining, glass production and the docks show that union members see the need to stand and fight immediately.

On 23 May, the government introduced new anti-union laws in Parliament. The 'Workplace Relations and other Legislation Bill', if enacted, will do away with most collectively negotiated national contracts and replace them with individual contracts. It will also drastically reduce the unions' rights of access to workplaces, give employers the right to veto which union workers can join, remove the unfair dismissal laws and re-introduce a ban on secondary picketing.

Howard and his Industry Minister, Peter Reith, have learned from the experience of other countries, in particular from Britain and New Zealand. They know full well that once such laws are in place the possibility of workers being able to take effective action against wage cuts, redundancies, unsafe conditions and victimisation is seriously undermined.

They also realise that the most efficient way to enforce such laws is to encourage the union leaders themselves to police them. With this in mind, the new Bill allows for unions to be sued for damages if members break any of the provisions of the law.

General Strike

Australian workers also need to learn the lessons of their brothers and sisters abroad. These laws must be stopped in their tracks, before they ever reach the statute book. This was the central message of the leaflet distributed by Workers Power(Australia) at the Canberra demo:

'Class Wide Attacks Demand a Class Wide Defence . . . the only class wide defence that will be effective in defeating the government's offensive will be a general strike, an indefinite withdrawal of workers' labour power on a mass scale . . . Such action is both necessary and possible.'

That is exactly right. The fight against the anti-union laws is absolutely central. It is the strategic heart of the bosses' offensive.

But, as the leaflet also says, 'general strikes don't fall from the sky'. And they certainly won't be handed down by the bureaucracy. Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Jennie George has threatened to go to the high court to try and oppose the bill. But since when have judges been the friends of workers' rights?

Bill Kelty, the ACTU secretary isn't even sure he's opposed to the laws. He thinks they are necessary to 'create wealth for the nation' but just wished they could be brought in 'a little slower'.

These whingeing bureaucrats don't inspire confidence. But workers can't simply ignore them. The only body that can call a general strike of the whole union movement is the leadership of ACTU. They do not want such a strike, but thousands of members of affiliated unions can force them to call it. And building a movement for a general strike from below, to force the leaders to act, is the best way to build a new fighting leadership to replace the timeservers and ditherers.

The arguments for a general strike must be taken into the unions right up to ACTU. But general strikes are not born simply from resolutions. They must be organised for, and the arguments for all out and indefinite

action have to be popularised in workplace bulletins, union branches and on the picket lines of every strike taking place now.

A general strike paralyses the normal functions of society. For the workers themselves to be able to control events they need to have their own base organisations. In Britain in 1926 these were called 'Action Councils' but, whatever the name, what will be needed are locally based organisations made up of elected delegates from the main working class organisations in the factories and communities.

A start can be made by building action committees to campaign against the Workplace Relations Bill. These should take the initiative in explaining the dangers of the Bill to the working class through leafleting workplaces, organising meetings and building solidarity with workers already in dispute.

Although the anti-union laws are so central to Howard's strategy that nothing short of an indefinite general strike is likely to stop them, this does not mean that other action cannot be used as part of the campaign against them.

Building for a general strike can and should include protest strikes and mass demos, like the one at Canberra, timed to coincide with key stages in the Bill's progress, or state and city-wide strikes, solidarity actions where disputes highlight particular aspects of the legislation.

One of the reasons why Howard's coalition is confident enough to risk such vicious legislation is the size of his parliamentary majority: 100 seats out of a total of only 148. But despite Howard's majority, there is every reason to believe that determined and militant mass action can defeat him.

A quick response is crucial

The fact that he heads a coalition is a potential weakness. Several sections of the Australian bourgeoisie are doubtful of the wisdom of his aggressive tactics. This was reflected in the Senate decision in May to defer the Workplace Relations Bill to a special committee that would not meet until late August. They sensed the need to take stock of the working class response, wary of provoking a potentially unstoppable backlash.

But because of Australia's short election cycle Howard has got to move fast in this term of office. He wants to go for a second term with the workers' movement already hamstrung and demobilised.

But, if time is precious for him, it is of the essence for the workers' movement. A determined counter-attack now, on the divisive budget cuts, on the attacks on Aboriginal rights as well as on the anti-union laws, is not an optional extra, not one possibility among many. For militants it is an absolute necessity to defeat a potentially paralysing blow.

Australian workers, as recent events have shown, have not been beaten. They will fight back. The task now is to generalise that willingness, organise and direct it towards smashing the coalition offensive. Such a fight could put socialism, not just a return to a wage cutting Labor government, firmly on the agenda.

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