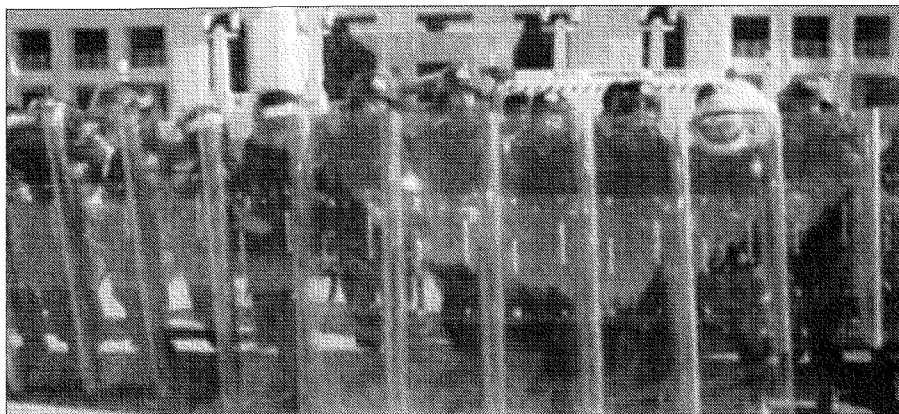


# Australia's Tories face the workers



**"M**ARITIME Union [dockers and seafarers] rank and file say: don't tinker with Industrial Relations." "Maritime Union tug crews say: Industrial Relations are a right." Slogans on handmade banners in Brisbane, on the 19 August cross-Australia trade-union day of action against the new Liberal government, struck a note not heard in Britain for more than ten years: workers feeling that they have and can hold institutionalised industrial strength.

That note is an index of the difference between 17 years of Tory government and 13 years even of such a wretched Labor government as Australia has had. Yet it has an undertone of uncertainty. There is widespread anger, and on 19 August Parliament House was stormed by a section of the Canberra demonstration. Yet one-off protests will not be enough. Trade-unionism in Australia has declined from over 50 per cent of the workforce to 35%. Strikes have decreased drastically. The system of industrial relations has already been "tinkered" with a lot, and with the connivance of left-wing unions such as the Maritime Union.

The Australian labour movement still has great strength readily available. Deploying it will require great political reorientation. Since their big election victory on 2 March, the Liberal-National coalition have been swinging the axe in all directions. Already well-flagged before 2 March were plans to privatise the telecom business, Telstra, and to rewrite industrial relations. The Australian system of "awards" — agreements on wages and conditions covering whole industries, ratified by an arbitration system — is to be lopped down in favour of individual con-

tracts. Legal limits on strikes are to be tightened, solidarity strikes outlawed, and union access to workplaces limited.

Thousands of jobs have been cut in the federal public service. Immigration controls have been tightened, and adjusted to favour better-off English-speaking migrants. The elected representative body of Australia's Aboriginal minority, ATSIC, has had its budget cut by almost half over the next few years, and Aboriginal land rights have been threatened.

Universities' funding has been cut drastically; students have been charged higher fees and required to repay their government-subsidised loans for those fees quicker; eligibility for student grants ("Austudy") has been further restricted, although even at present 60% of university students get no Austudy at all; and from 1998 Austudy is to be subsumed in a general Youth Allowance. Dole claimants are now required to keep a daily diary of their job searches. The Commonwealth Employment Service (analogous to Job Centres) is to be abolished, and the social security system will call on private agencies to get the jobless into work.

Child-care subsidies are to be restricted. The special levy charged as part of income tax for the health insurance system, Medicare, is to be increased for higher earners, with the avowed aim of driving them into private health insurance. At present 34% of Australians rely on private health insurance, and as recently as 1983 it was 63%. The Australian welfare system is already heavily geared to means-testing and to arrangements where public provision for the poor flanks private provision for the bet-

ter-off — more so than the British welfare state, even after 17 years of the Tories.

There has been a spate of protests. Universities were partly shut on 30 May and again on 7 August by lecturers' and staff strikes, with some support from students. Public service unions have called one-day strikes. The actions across Australia on 19 August were called by the ACTU, Australia's TUC. Some of the biggest rallies (60,000 in Sydney, 10,000 in Brisbane), and also the most youthful, have been against the government's cuts in the budget of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The crack in the bell, the flaw which makes the protests lack confidence and the militant speeches by ACTU president Jennie George ring hollow, is the fact that almost all that the Liberals are doing, even in industrial relations, is a continuation down paths pioneered by the 1983-96 Labor governments, to which the ACTU was tied by the various versions of the Accord.

By 1996, as Australian Labor Party national secretary Gary Gray recently put it: "We couldn't run on policies because they [the voters] thought we were liars on policy. We couldn't run on our record because they thought our record stunk." And since 2 March their major shift has been a move by Victorian ALP leader John Brumby... to "moderate" his opposition to New Right flagbearer Jeff Kennett.

And, as yet, there is no concerted rank-and-file organisation, consistently pushing alternative policies, within the labour movement. The official ALP "Socialist Left" is weak and discredited by a thousand dirty deals with the Labor right. The revolutionary left has turned away from the ALP, and often from the unions too, to various single-issue campaigns.

The elements for a fightback are there, in the still formidable strength of Australia's trade unions and the many thousands of activists wanting a left-wing alternative to ALP politics. The job of bringing them together is yet to be done.

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