

# Workers' Liberty



*The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself*  
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## Open up the labour movement to socialist and class struggle politics

Union leaderships, even the best of them, are keeping a lid on any controversial demands, or criticisms of the Labor government. There is plenty of scope for common cause between socialists in unions, and active delegates to organise support for demands that the labour movement should be making. Big picture demands, such as the right to strike, can guide opposition to the Government's Fair Work amendments that make it even harder to take protected industrial action.

By raising demands in union delegate meetings, conferences and decision-making bodies, and sharing opinions and stories between unions, we can help to break open the political debate, that is needed for a renewal of the labour movement to make it capable of winning what people need.

And what we really need is socialism, democratic and social control over economic life, because that is the only way to build a society of solidarity, equality and ecological sustainability.

This newsletter looks at the first Labor budget in nearly a decade, and the demands that unionists and socialists should be openly discussing.

### **Labor's budget overlooks the public**

Reactions to the budget, together with the *Secure Jobs, Better Pay* Bill, can help socialists understand how to strengthen both the Left and the labour movement.

Trade unionists, climate action campaigners, unemployment activists, housing advocates, women's groups, indigenous leaders all identify some welcome changes, but most also identify serious shortcomings.

The epitome of the Labor government's intentions is its position on tax cuts which benefit people on high incomes. Labor voted for these Morrison Stage 3 tax cuts, then promised in its election campaign not to reverse them. As the budget deficit forecasts

worsen, ever louder demands are made to stop these tax cuts. But for now, the government says it must keep its promise. Pragmatism underpins Labor's approach. It wants to avoid feeding Dutton's Opposition, or riling up the usual suspects, the Murdoch media, right wing and business lobbies.

Inflation, especially in energy costs and interest rates, combined with declining real wages and income support, are the major problems that affect working class households across the board. Winning pay rises, and increased income support, is the best way to combat this. (See the section on Union rights and low pay.)

The Government still channels public spending into quasi-markets in care, housing, education and employment services. These are all services which could be meeting people's needs outside the wages system, if they were adequately funded and not outsourced to profit takers.

Housing is the most stressful problem for many, whether it's rents or interest rates. The Renters and Housing Union observes that the Government's projected increase in "affordable" housing relies on private developers, is not funding public housing, and has no "meaningful national policy to regulate the private rental market", both essential to make stable homes achievable for low-income renters.

Care and education services could also help with the cost of living. Aged care and the National Disability Insurance Schemes both operate through market subsidy, both require more and better-quality services, and both are highly labour intensive. Child care is a funding priority for the government, as it enables more participation in the labour force. The government shows no sign of intention to de-privatise in any of these areas, despite a series of inquiries showing that low-quality care and in some cases abuse, and rorts, are a consequence of funding for-profit providers. As

an exception, new vocational training funding appears to be targeted to TAFE, rather than private providers.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has welcomed commitments from the Labor Government to engage in “genuine bargaining with public sector workers for real wage rises which will help drive wages growth across the economy”. If Labor delivers on this and abolition of the staffing cap, allowing agencies to hire staff directly, and increasing the number of “secure frontline service delivery jobs” it will be an improvement in both services and working conditions. But much more is needed.

Reinstating all the positions that have been cut under the “efficiency dividend”, and bringing back into public operation the various outsourced and quasi-market services, including employment services, would increase the proportion of public to private sector employment. More appealing working conditions than private sector employment, and better, more affordable services, would benefit people struggling with both the cost of living, and earning a secure income.

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## Union rights and low incomes

Most union officials in the ACTU expect to achieve more by working with a sympathetic government rather than by organising workers to act together to win demands. So the ACTU limits its demands within what it thinks allows for a stable Labor government. The ACTU has presented the budget and the IR reforms as largely victories, especially for working women. Paid parental leave and expanded child care funding, plus 2 weeks domestic violence leave are steps forward.

The commitment to “gender pay equity” is paired with a Fair Work Act reform bill *Secure Jobs, Better Pay*. This would allow multi-employer bargaining, especially in female dominated industries, and is supposed to help overcome low pay. It has been largely illegal for workers to combine against several employers simultaneously. These reforms are welcomed by the ACTU despite critical and disturbing problems, in 2 main areas.

One is gutting the Better Off Overall Test (BOOT), which the Retail and Fast Food Workers’ Union (RAFFWU) has used to successfully challenge in court many deals that the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) made in cahoots with major employers. The second problem is that industrial action will require a new Protected Action Ballot Order (PABO) every three months, even more restrictive

than current PABOs which are valid until a bargain is reached. The major concessions by the ACTU on the BOOT, and the crippling restrictions on industrial action is most likely the result of the SDA’s funding and membership weight in the ACTU and the ALP.

A public face of unanimity is part of the ACTU’s *modus operandi*. This is despite the left credential of Sally McManus and Michelle O’Neill, and despite the United Workers Union which has been the most high-profile in organising strikes by low-paid workers. If there are any voices of dissent, they’re not known to the wider labour movement, and not contributing to a democratic process of educating members and making decisions.

The union movement also seems to be silent on the need to raise JobSeeker unemployment benefit and other allowances and pensions. Labor is delaying doing this, because Albanese promised that there would not even be a review of JobSeeker in Labor’s first budget. The budget included a commitment “to reviewing the rate of income support at each and every federal budget from here on out, starting in May 2023” according to ACOSS *Raise the Rate For Good*. The Australian Unemployed Workers’ Union is petitioning to demand “the lower house raise all income support to the Henderson Poverty Line”, which they put at \$88 per day (compared to \$48 currently for JobSeeker). Even when reviews commence, the government will be more concerned about maintaining work-eagerness as demanded by employers, than in making sure unwaged workers are not living in poverty. Only if the organisations claiming to represent people living on income support can organise and mobilise these people, so they can act in solidarity, will they make enough impact to shift the union movement from silence to active support, and stand a chance of making the government decide that it’s better to take the side of low-income people instead of the side of employers. Otherwise any increases in payments are likely to be far too low.

Alongside the political accommodation and silence from union officials, and despite laws which make strikes very difficult, there have been more strikes and industrial action in 2022 than in many years. This is the greatest source of optimism. It has the most potential if shop stewards and delegates involved in leading these actions in their workplaces can become an organised left in the union movement, and if socialists can establish links with them.

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## Delusions about Labor's IR reforms

*Craig Buckley, a union lawyer, spoke with Janet Burstall for Workers' Liberty about Labor's industrial relations reforms.*

"RAFFWU is basically right" about the Secure Jobs, Better Pay Bill, Craig confirmed. It "contains more bureaucratic obstacles to taking protected action. Industrial Action voted for in a ballot would be protected only for a 3 month period, rather than the life of the bargaining period as is current." Craig says his reflects that the government is "trying to be even handed" and give something to both employers and unions.

The main reason for the Bill "putting obstacles in the way of unions that aren't Registered Organisations under the Fair Work Act is directed towards some of the right-wing Liberal Party associations set up in Queensland to represent teachers and nurses" according to Craig. These include the Nurses Professional Association of Queensland, Teachers' Professional Association of Queensland. However, this is all the better for the SDA in that it also disadvantages RAFFWU.

This Bill is "the first of two tranches of industrial relations reform, the second one is due early 2023, and I think the unions hope they will get the good stuff next time. For example, curbs on labour hire, through same job same pay rules. There are probably a lot of union officials who are uncomfortable about some of the things in this current bill, but they're probably in wait and see mode, or suffering self-delusion about what has been promised."

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## Climate and the budget

The budget recognises climate change, with funding initiatives including renewable energy projects, electric vehicle uptake, and increasing staff in the responsible department.

But the budget doesn't touch on fossil fuel subsidies or closing off means for corporate tax minimisation. Renew Economy reports that between 2016-2020 Australia's spending on fossil fuel subsidies rose by 4 per cent and totalled \$A59.2 billion, and that the OECD shows \$10.6 billion spent on them in 2020.

The government is pulling in opposite directions, wanting both to act on climate change, and to maintain business confidence. The government could improve the budget position and at the same time, set a direction away from fossil fuel exporting, by withdrawing the range of subsidies to fossil fuel corporations and users.

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## Workers' Liberty: what we stand for

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Public ownership of essential industries, and taxation of the rich to fund renewable energy and environmental protection, decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all. End fossil fuel extraction.
- A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women, and social provision to free women from domestic labour. For reproductive justice: free abortion on demand; the right to choose when and whether to have children. Full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Indigenous control of indigenous affairs. Working class unity against racism.
- Free refugees, let them stay, right for workers to remain in Australia without insecurity of short-term visas.
- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
- Democracy at every level of society, in trade unions, and from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
- Equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

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## Pages from a militant life: Richer, and with more poverty

by Bob Carnegie

From my childhood and mid-teens, 50 or 60 years ago, to today, people have become significantly richer in material consumer goods in the stronger capitalist economies, and, in fact, in some ways, in weaker capitalist economies too.

When I was 13 or 14, in the mid 70s, TV came to Australia on a large scale. Initially colour TV in the Carnegie household consisted of plastic coloured wrap on a black and white TV. Eventually dad bowed to family pressure and bought a colour TV

on the never-never, slang for hire purchase, with quite high interest rates.

In 1963, a black-and-white TV had cost ten times the average weekly wage (and that average of all wages, boosted by some high rates, is maybe 40% above the wage of the average worker). TVs became much cheaper in the 1980s and after. Today a new LCD colour TV can be bought for one-ninth of an average weekly wage.

Today it's common in Australia, even in families with quite low household income, to have a TV in each bedroom. Even in China or in Bangladesh, most city people have TVs and mobile phones.

The super-exploitation of workers in China, Bangladesh, etc. shows itself in the high profit rates for capitalists in those countries, often contractors for multinationals; and the fact that workers there may well have TVs and phones which workers in richer countries lacked 60 years ago, but still lack safe and healthy work conditions, and, often, decent housing, reliable electricity supply without power cuts, and other public infrastructure.

Clothes too have become much cheaper compared to when I was a lad. I remember as a child going with my slightly younger brother and mum (dad was away at sea) and getting our yearly allotment of clothes. A lot of attention was paid to making sure you could "grow into" your shoes.

Now it is common for teenagers from even poorer working-class families to have a relatively wide choice of clothes, and even some "brands".

The sporting shoe giant Nike started from a product actually inferior to Adidas or Puma, but overtook them through targeted marketing using individual sports stars like Michael Jordan. Poor children in ghettos will commit crimes to have a pair of "Air Jordans". That product attachment was not part of my growing up, but since being unleashed (in Australia) in the early 80s it has become common.

Capitalism's capacity to change itself and find niches in marketplaces never ceases to amaze.

And yet homelessness, which was rare in Australia when I was young, has grown almost steadily since the country first started compiling official statistics for it in 2001. A recent report found that one person in 20 in the age group 15-19 had a first experience of homelessness in the years 2020 and 2021.

Food banks started only in the 1990s: the numbers dependent on them have surged year-on-year since then.

Many material gains of the era from 1950 to the 1980s (in the stronger capitalist countries, later in the weaker ones) were solid and real. Washing machine ownership per household is over 90% now in all but the very poorest regions of China, and higher in Turkey than in the USA.

But poverty and insecurity remain real and growing even in the richest capitalist countries, and endemic in the poorer ones.

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## **After 18 Months, Striking Warrior Met Miners and Families Hold the Line**

In Alabama, USA a heroic miners strike begun in April 2021, continues. They are angry about deaths at work, and want improved safety, as well as restoration of full pay after what was supposed to be a temporary 20 percent wage and benefit cuts, to save jobs after a bankruptcy. Bob Carnegie says "The miners and their families are surviving on their union's and the general community support. They are 100% union in Alabama which has less than 3% union density. Please spread the news of these working class heroes as far and as wide as you can, send messages of support and get your workplace to send resolutions." See - <https://umwa.org/umwa2021strikefund>

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## **Myanmar's sham election plan**

by Hein Htet Kyaw

Many political parties with influence among the public are boycotting the military junta's sham election, despite the willingness of some opportunistic parties to participate. The international community is also urged to refrain from endorsing the military junta's fraudulent election. The revolutionary spirit of the Burmese working class shouldn't be limited by a sham election. **Read more online**

<https://workersliberty.org/story/2022-11-02/myanmars-sham-election-plan>

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## **Join the fight for socialism**

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