

Comment from the ground

An Australian public service union member provides comment on the Australian government's attack on labour...

Australia has a federal system of government in which each state has its own Parliament and Premier and the two territories, Northern and the Australian Capital, have a House of Assembly and a Chief Minister. There is also the Commonwealth government governing over all of Australia including its State and Territory parliaments and houses of assembly. Industrial relations is the responsibility of the state and territory governments. This allows for the industrial relations system to adapt to local conditions. It has protected many of the nation's workers from a single conservative or right wing government imposing its

anti-worker policies on everyone.

From a business point of view, this means they have had to deal with different industrial relations systems, laws, institutions and cultures and the associated costs, confusion, time and effort. If the Commonwealth government controlled the whole show only one set of laws and institutions would exist and the whole system would be much easier to control.

The problem for workers and the left is that we have in power at the national level one of the most conservative, right wing governments Australia has ever had. John Howard, an elderly but sprightly and

extremely cunning and experienced politician, leads it. This little bastard has attacked workers, unions, students, nurses, aborigines, refugees, single mothers, welfare recipients, the national broadcaster (the ABC) and civil or public servants, with unprecedented vigor.

He has got away with it for about nine years because the Australian people have lost their way. The other major reason why Howard has done so well is because the Labor Party, the opposition, has few ideas of its own and is sympathetic to many of the government's policies. In other words, there's virtually no choice of political party.

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Labour government faces challenge from unions

Union leaders in the United Kingdom are demanding changes in employment laws to allow for secondary industrial action. **Andrew Taylor** reports on an attack on the Labour government by unionists for failing to repeal anti-trade union legislation.

Leaders at the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton recently called for a new trade union freedom bill to allow sympathy action, simplify balloting procedures, protect strikers from dismissal and to bar employers from replacing striking workers. This comes in the wake of the firing of 600 workers from Gate Gourmet, the catering supplier to British Airways. Alan Johnson, Labour's Trade and Industry Secretary rejected union calls to allow

sympathy action after the bitter dispute led to the dismissals. Flights from Heathrow came to a halt in August when BA staff staged an illegal secondary strike in support of the sacked Gate Gourmet workers.

According to the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), which represents Gate Gourmet workers, legislation also prevents employees from within the same company, but working at different sites, from embarking on sympathy action. TGWU head

Tony Woodley said: 'Anti-union laws are a green light for greed... We have to say to the government that the time for waffling over employment law is over. If solidarity is a crime then send us all to jail. Our movement was built on solidarity; that's why Thatcher made solidarity unlawful.'

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This is an edited version of an article by Andrew Taylor, Employment Correspondent for the Financial Times in Britain.