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Just ordinary angry Aussies

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ACTU secretary **Greg Combet**, power-dressed to perfection, was powdered for the TV cameras.

Shiny noses weren't being left to chance. Nothing was taking the gloss off yesterday's protest.

A bigger-than-Melbourne Cup crowd had packed the city centre, but the big sell was going further -- national.

The Government had a \$50 million advertising budget to spruik its laws.

Unions had a rally and 75 pay-TV minutes to sell their misgivings before Sky Channel trotted out its regular In the Gig racing show.

Cameras covered the Federation Square stage as a rally helper pounced on a young mum.

``Because you've got such beautiful children, near the cameras please," she said. ``I'm serious."

Further up Swanston St, a dozen or so women, mostly young, held the big Trades Hall banner that would lead the march.

They waved happily at police helicopters overhead. One young mum showed her daughter the nice horses in their perspex eye protectors.

Hardliners? Hardly seen. Blue singlets and blue language? Once in a blue moon.

Instead? A fresh, new, blemish-free, carefully cast face of workplace revolt. Early, under grey skies, Federation Square looked like a kids' party.

Nurses had yellow balloons, actors dramatic black ones and teachers wore cherry red, wipe-clean plastic ponchos. A man in a blue beret carried a sign: Trouble Makers Union (southern division).

One bloke wore a pirate hat, another war medals.

Mostly, though, they wore their credentials as ordinary Australians like a

badge of honour.

Overwhelmingly, the biggest protest crowd in decades were regular-looking people, the faces you see at a school concert or footy club barbecue.

Predictably, Socialist Workers, anarchists and all the species of the hard Left were there, just so swamped they nearly vanished. A Green Left paper boy grumbled ``Get rid of bloody Beazley'', peevish perhaps that business was slow despite a four-page special lift-out this issue -- ``Venezuelan Workers Take Control''.

Che Guevara badges were \$2, but sales were less than radical.

For most of the crowd, Marx meant Groucho and Lenin was a Beatle.

Trotsky? Winter harness racing at Mt Buller, maybe, as shown on Sky Channel.

The rally started near the State Library, protesters having spilled up Swanston St and down from the north.

Metal workers were cheered from the footpath like Cup parade horses when they marched south to join the main rally.

So huge was the throng, it took 70 minutes of marching before the last groups from Federation Square passed the starting point.

``We're angry, we're loud, we're union and we're proud,'' the chant regularly went up.

It wasn't so deafeningly loud, though, and the faces weren't overly angry ones. More like loudish and peevish.

Union leaders vowed to fight. That word came out a lot, but menace was missing from the ranks.

Instead Waltzing Matilda played.

Ned Kelly shirts came out, and lots of the building workers' union ones with the Eureka pledge.

Southern Crosses flew. The Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi chant started. On big screens and punters' TVs, old newsreels showed miners all sweat, toil and mud -- faces chosen to stir the spirit.

Every dinkum icon except Phar Lap and the Don -- and in his museum case, Big Red was handy enough to the rally's Carlton Gardens end point.

And the end point, with 700 days until the next federal election, was?

That 150,000 is an impressive lot of people, whatever face you choose to put on it. Hard to ignore right now, but a harder act to follow.

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