Australia:

Key ACTU meeting reveals unions in decline

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Not so long ago the congresses, key meetings, deliberations and decisions of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australia's peak union body, were widely reported in the capitalist media. Led by Bob Hawke, who went on to become prime minister, and then by Bill Kelty, the ACTU's relations with successive governments, under Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Keating, often dominated headlines.

It is therefore of some note that the ACTU's recent annual council meeting--made up of the ACTU executive and representatives of all affiliates--held in the Victorian seaside resort of Lorne, went largely unreported in the media. As for the vast majority of working people, they remained oblivious to the proceedings or completely uninterested.

This stark indifference from all quarters is testimony to the ACTU's historic decline and breakup. It has a dwindling significance on the official industrial scene and is increasingly alienated from broad sections of working people.

The meeting was held in the midst of the deepening offensive against the working class. Numerous reports have shown a rapid decline in working and social conditions--ranging from the growth of mass unemployment and escalating industrial deaths and injuries, to the increasing use of child labour and proliferation of sweatshop workplaces.

Just weeks before the well-heeled bureaucrats gathered in Lorne, reports appeared in major newspapers showing the return of large-scale child labour. At least 82,500 children under 16 are now working and 1,600 child workers aged between 12 and 16 are seriously injured or killed every year.

The ACTU meeting coincided with the release of a National Occupation and Safety Commission survey revealing that an average of 597 people are killed annually either at, or travelling to, work. That is about 11 per week.

None of these burning issues were seriously discussed at the ACTU's three-day gathering. Nor was there any talk of the so-called social wage--improved social conditions for workers--that was promoted at ACTU gatherings under the 13-year partnership with the Labor governments of Hawke and Keating.

What preoccupied the assembled bureaucrats was a continuing decline in union membership and, of course, the corresponding loss of dues. They fear that the loss of their grip over the workforce will lead employers to increasingly sideline the unions.

The membership haemorrhage has escalated despite the fact that in early 1997 the ACTU launched an extensive, and one might add expensive, campaign to attract new members.

The membership drive followed a devastating drop in union membership under the ACTU's wages and prices Accord with the Labor governments. The rate of membership had plummeted from 48.3 percent in 1982 to only 31.1 percent, and just 23 percent in the private sector. By deserting the unions, many workers had registered their disgust with the unions' collaboration in lowering living standards. Hundreds of thousands more had lost their jobs or had been pushed into casual or contract work.

The ACTU assigned $1 million to its 1997-98 recruitment campaign. Amid a blaze of publicity, new young officials were hired as recruiters. But despite offering cheap loans and an array of other gimmicks, they failed to overcome the hostility of older workers or appeal to young workers, who viewed the unions as having nothing to do with their lives and struggles.

Instead of an influx of new members, the unions have lost almost another quarter of a million members in the

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past 12 months. By August 1998, the rate stood at just 28 percent, a decline of 217,350 members. It is a far cry from the 51 percent coverage in 1976.

This collapse is all the more stark when one considers the claim by the ACTU and the unions that they secured a resounding victory against the Howard government and Patrick Stevedoring in this year's protracted waterfront dispute. If one believed Kelty and the current ACTU president Jennie George, the waterfront fight heralded the beginning of the revival of the union movement.

The reality, as is now clear, is that the ACTU and the unions agreed to the destruction of half the jobs at Patrick's and the elimination of basic working conditions. That benchmark is now being imposed at P&O Stevedoring and throughout the waterfront.

The ACTU's decline can be further measured by the old adage concerning certain types of wild life that habitually abandon sinking vessels. Jennie George announced last month that she would quit her ACTU post to seek a comfortable seat as a Labor MP in the NSW upper house.

There are also strong indications that long-standing secretary Kelty, who has disappeared from public view for months, will make his absence official and jump ship. But regardless of who stands at the helm of the rotting hulk, the ACTU's role is being downgraded.

At the close of the council meeting, George told the media that the various unions would have to take 'charge of their own futures'. The ACTU would only advise unions and run the annual 'living wage claim' in the courts.

She also claimed that the ACTU would campaign against 'over work,' the result of increased work hours, unpaid overtime and downsizing. The ACTU campaign would be based on the old slogan 'eight hours work, rest and recreation,' she said. It was not 'a favourable political climate in which to operate,' she was quick to add.

George complained the unions had failed to act swiftly enough 'to stem the decline of full-time employment and job security'. In fact the ACTU and the unions did act swiftly--and one might add ruthlessly--to impose these conditions on workers.

Under the 1983-96 Accord the unions forced their members to make massive concessions in the name of 'international competitiveness'. Wages were suppressed, long-standing work practices dismantled and thousands of jobs destroyed in every industry. Via Enterprise Bargaining Agreements, unions agreed to increased working hours, around-the-clock working, nightmare shifts and unpaid overtime arrangements.

Figures released by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations and Training (ACIRT) show that 79 percent of such agreements up to 1998 were aimed at increasing working hours and work flexibility. Next on the list of the most common provisions came 'consultation' mechanisms, enshrining the role of the unions in imposing employers' demands.

The record shows that since the end of the Accord, the unions have continued to play the same treacherous role. Their services to the corporate boardrooms continue, regardless of what political party sits on the treasury benches.

At the close of the ACTU council meeting one leading official summed up the union bureaucracy's cynical contempt for the working class. Shrugging his shoulders at the falling numbers, he declared that at least the ACTU membership drive had recruited the next generation of union officials.

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