

ALP National Conference: Doug Cameron and the politics of "fair trade"

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10 August 2000

The stage-managed clash over "free" and "fair" trade at last week's Australian Labour Party national conference in Hobart was used to project the image of a leadership team with the discipline and agenda to serve big business.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) national secretary Doug Cameron foreshadowed the debate, which underscored the right-wing character of both camps, more than a month ago with the launch of a "fair trade" campaign. Speaking at the union's national congress in mid-July, Cameron outlined the chauvinist agenda that has since become the platform for a series of demonstrations by AMWU members.

"We're losing jobs all over the country," he declared, "because jobs are being exported in the name of profits to south east Asia, to China, to Vietnam and to Malaysia and Indonesia, where workers are earning 60 cents an hour."

Cameron called for a "social tariff" against these countries. Resorting to military language, he declared that "a social tariff is another form of sanctions and we should never unilaterally disarm as we have done in this country."

The AMWU's "fair trade" campaign has been launched in an effort to shore up the union's credibility in the face of a declining and increasingly hostile membership. It is as hypocritical as it is reactionary, with the spectacle of union bureaucrats such as Doug Cameron, who have been chief enforcers of job destruction and increased exploitation of manufacturing workers in Australia, posing as champions of working conditions throughout the region.

"Why should we support governments who subjugate their people, who allow child labour, the torture, detention, intimidation or killing of trade union activists as part of their pursuit of [a] low income, free trade approach," Cameron said. "Those governments must be brought to book."

In the lead-up to the conference, Cameron threatened a showdown with Labor's right-wing leadership, but the final result was what one newspaper dubbed "a civilised encounter". According to the New South Wales Labor Council's website *Workers Online*, Cameron presented only one of several amendments to Labor's trade policy that he took to Hobart and agreed to "go easy" on the Labor leadership during the debate.

On day two of the ALP conference, he moved the amendment, which called on the International Labor

Organisation and various financial institutions of global capitalism "to assist governments to take the necessary steps to implement basic labour standards". He urged the imposition of sanctions against countries which failed to meet their obligations.

But with an eye to his dwindling constituency among manufacturing workers, Cameron used the platform to issue a condemnation of the economic rationalism of the 1983-1996 Hawke and Keating Labor governments. At the same time, he went out of his way to praise Beazley: "Regardless of the differences we have on this issue of trade," Cameron told the delegates, business executives, lobbyists and assembled media, "Kim Beazley has got the vision and, in my view, the compassion to look after working people in this country. Kim Beazley will be a great leader of this country." A Beazley Labor government, he said, would be "fair and just".

Despite the fulsome tribute, Opposition leader Kim Beazley took the stage to deliver a strident defence of the Hawke-Keating years, "Delegates, we cannot go backwards. For the last 15 years the drive of the Australian Labor Party has been to enhance jobs in this country by making this nation internationally competitive."

Only two weeks earlier, former Labor prime minister Keating, acting as the mouthpiece for dominant sections of big business, weighed into the trade debate, defending his own government's free trade policies. When asked: "What would you say to blue collar workers who have seen their jobs lost in Australia?" Keating replied, "What do I say? What is your new job like? One of the 2.5 million created since the early 1980s. People have found better jobs. I mean, did we ever hurt anybody liberating them from the car assembly line?"

Under Hawke and Keating more than 1.5 million jobs were destroyed, many thousands of these in the car industry. Sacked car workers did not discover a career path to better paid jobs on the information superhighway. Most were "liberated" to long-term unemployment. The bulk of the new jobs created under Labor were low-wage, part-time and casual. Keating's brazen claim about new jobs replacing old ones is a rerun of the arguments used by free-traders during the 19th century, who justified the free movement of capital on philanthropic grounds. The real outcome has been a staggering increase in poverty and

social inequality.

Keating called on Labor to intensify this agenda and poured scorn on Cameron's fair trade campaign: "In the international division of production we have to be at the front of the wave. We have to be on the board with our toes hanging over the front! If we are up the back just sloshing about waiting for the next wave—which is where Doug Cameron and Co are—the likelihood is it will go straight over the top of us."

The former prime minister, who now enjoys a lucrative career as, among other things, a business consultant in Asia, blurted out the national arrogance and chauvinism of the privileged layers for whom he speaks: "In the end it is actually better for Australians to have higher disposable incomes by having someone else make their shoes, and someone else make their shirts and their underwear etc., while they do things which are more valuable."

Cameron, like most sections of the trade union bureaucracy, has spent recent years seeking to distance himself from the record of the Hawke and Keating governments. But the AMWU, of which he was a leader at the time, spearheaded the Accords agreements of the 1980s and 90s between these Labor governments and the ACTU, helping to devise and enforce each new stage of Labor's agenda: Australia Reconstructed, Award Restructuring, the Two-Tier Wages System and then Enterprise Bargaining. Cameron and his mentor, former ACTU Assistant-Secretary Laurie Carmichael, suppressed all opposition to this agenda in the unions. They ousted and sacked local delegates, victimised militants and shutdown shop committees and other rank-and-file forums that resisted job cuts, downsizing and closures. Via the drive for "international competitiveness" the unions were transformed, abandoning any semblance of defending the working class in favour of corporatism and "world's best practice".

Cameron's call for protectionism articulates the outlook of key sections of the trade union leadership. Speaking in support, Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union leader John Sutton revealed its political logic when he told the conference: "A mob called One Nation attracted a million votes in an election not so long ago. It would be wrong to think that they did this simply on the basis of racism."

Pauline Hanson's far-right One Nation movement made a platform of tariff protection and anti-Asian racism, winning 23 percent of the primary vote in the 1997 Queensland state election and highlighting acute disaffection in the electorate with the two-party system. Outside the conference David Harrison, secretary of the Queensland branch of the AMWU, added, "It was right what was said in there—there are a million voters who voted for One Nation, and they haven't found a home yet." Harrison had earlier called on his members to vote against sitting Labor MPs who had given their support to free trade.

The final vote on Cameron's fair trade amendment was a victory for the free traders, 105 votes to 82, with the numbers

delivered to Beazley in advance by the ALP's tightly controlled factional system.

Facing media criticism over his weakness as leader and his alleged pandering to old-style Labor rhetoric, Beazley's stoush with Cameron provided the Opposition leader the opportunity he needed to show his independence from "union control". Beazley pitched to big business, declaring that Labor had "the herbs" to enforce global competitiveness. After the debate he left the conference venue to address a pro-tariffs demonstration called by the AMWU. Introduced by Cameron and presented with a union hat, he expressed his gratitude, "I must say I've appreciated the way Doug has toned down the areas of disagreement which were completely vital from his point of view. He's done very well in that regard." Despite these kind words, Beazley declined to wear his new union hat before the cameras.

While couched in terms of the defence of workers' conditions, the call for social tariffs and protectionism represents the interests of the more backward sections of business that have been unable to compete in the globalised economy. Cameron and the AMWU represent, to a large degree, many of these unviable industries, although they also enjoy a close working relationship with leading transnational corporations that operate in Australia. Manufacturing workers are subordinated, via corporatist Enterprise Bargaining Agreements struck by the union with these companies, to the drive for competitiveness on a daily basis.

It is no accident that Cameron, Sutton and Harrison have found themselves, on the tariff issue, in the company of One Nation. And while Sutton attempted to distance union calls for tariffs from One Nation's racism, the two are inextricably linked. It is worth noting that Doug Cameron has given his support to American Federation of Labour-Confederation of Industrial Organisations Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka's campaign against free trade with China, a campaign that has united the American unions with fascist politicians such as Patrick Buchanan.



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