

Peak Australian union body seeks alliance with religious right

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An extraordinary article appeared early this month on *Workers Online*—the website of the New South Wales (NSW) peak union body, Unions NSW. It reveals just how far to the right the unions have moved in the wake of the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) devastating defeat in the October federal elections.

Under the heading “Moral Crusade to Save the Family”, the article unashamedly announces: “Unions NSW will seek an alliance with the Religious Right to show how industrial deregulation destroys families and ruins communities.” According to Unions NSW, research to assist the project will be undertaken by the \$1 million thinktank Working NSW, launched by the peak union body on December 3.

The article quotes Unions NSW secretary John Robertson hailing the move as an “opportunity for the labour movement to enter the moral debate” and states: “It is our challenge as a progressive movement to reclaim the moral high ground and hold the Prime Minister to account for policies that undermine the family and community.” “To this end,” Robertson declares, “Unions NSW will be seeking to open up a dialogue with the churches and encourage organisations like Family First and other faith-based organisations.”

The turn of Unions NSW to the religious right and Family First has nothing to do with holding the government “to account” or with defending the interests of working people. The main role of such organisations is to politically divert the growing social unrest generated by deepening inequality and economic uncertainty away from a struggle against the profit system and into the dead-end of religion.

The program of Family First—which is aligned with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God—is similar to that of its evangelistic counterparts in the US which threw their weight behind the reelection of George W. Bush. It calls for socially regressive and anti-democratic legislation to

oppose abortion rights, same sex marriages and stem cell research. One of Family First's parliamentary candidates called for the destruction of brothels, liquor shops and mosques and one member publicly advocated the burning of lesbians at the stake.

The party's proclaimed concern over worsening social conditions did not stop it forging an alliance with Howard, who for the last eight years has presided over the wholesale dismantling of welfare provisions and implemented savage cuts to public education, health and aged care. Nor did the Howard government's record of outright lying as justification for its participation in the criminal war on Iraq, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent Iraqi people, offend Family First's sense of morality. During the elections, Family First struck a deal to swap preferences with the Liberal-National Party Coalition in more than 100 seats, thus helping Howard return to power while procuring a seat for itself in the Senate.

In turning to the religious right, the union bureaucracy is accommodating to political conditions that it itself helped create. For almost two decades the unions have openly collaborated with both Labor and Liberal governments to impose a vicious pro-market agenda, including the slashing of permanent jobs, dismantling of working conditions and the introduction of unprecedented levels of casualisation. Attempts by workers to defend their hard-won conditions have been systematically isolated and betrayed by the unions.

Following the federal elections, sections of the media claimed that “Christian moral values”—presented as so-called “traditional” family values—played a significant role in Howard's victory. The truth is that Howard was only returned to office because of the total lack of any genuine opposition from the Labor Party on any of the critical political, economic and social issues confronting the majority of the population. This allowed the Coalition

to run a fear campaign, exploiting widespread economic and social insecurity among ordinary working people.

During the election, Labor attempted to forge its own deals with Family First. And in the weeks following its defeat, senior ALP figures alluded to the need for the party to take into account the so called “moral” and “value” issues raised by the religious right.

Far from opposing Labor’s accommodation to such anti-working class and reactionary political formations, the unions were busy cutting their own path to the very same forces—a development that constitutes a particularly grotesque reflection of the political degeneration of the trade unions and Laborism as a whole.

More than 100 years ago, the unions were forged when workers began combining in struggle to advance their conditions. But the limitations of purely industrial campaigns soon became clear, and in the 1890s the unions founded the ALP to take the fight for reforms into the parliamentary arena.

At no stage did the unions or Labor advocate the overthrow of capitalism. Instead, they put forward that reforms to improve the lot of the working class could be won within the framework of the profit system, by pressuring the employers through industrial struggles and by parliamentary legislation. Such a perspective was only possible under conditions where production remained largely anchored within the national arena.

Over the past three decades, however, sweeping advances in telecommunications and transport, enabling the disaggregation of production and the rapid movement of capital across the globe, have undermined the entire political framework of national reformism. Now capitalist corporations can easily relocate production to seek out the cheapest sources of labour and the most lucrative government concessions. Correspondingly, both Labor and the unions have undergone a transformation, offering their services to big business to rip back all the past gains made by the working class, so as to attract highly mobile global capital.

In line with this shift, the unions and Labor have abandoned any conception of advancing the social position of the working class. Both are preoccupied with cultivating relations with different sections of the corporate elite, and it is quite possible that, in the not-too-distant future, the formal ties that remain between them could be completely broken. Interestingly, in a sudden move just last month, the peak NSW union body decided to change its name from the Labor Council of NSW to Unions NSW.

In the past, the unions used their membership, not only to wheel and deal with the Labor Party, but to pressure the minor capitalist parties in the Senate, such as the Australian Democrats and the Greens, to use their balance of power to block or amend anti-union legislation. This perspective was decisively shattered in October, when the Liberal-National Party Coalition gained a majority in both upper and lower houses in the elections—providing another justification for union officials to turn to the religious right.

Of course, any question of Unions NSW, or its counterparts in other Australian states, mobilising a broad movement of working people to oppose the Howard government’s attacks is out of the question. They fear that any such campaign could rapidly get out of their control and cut across their approaches to various employers on the basis that the unions remain an effective industrial police force.

It is highly significant that Unions NSW employed the services of US professor and former Labor Secretary under Clinton, Robert Reich, to assist its orientation to religious reaction. As a key figure in the first Clinton administration Reich supported pro-market policies that ensured tens of millions of Americans continued to live in poverty, the number of people without health insurance increased, and homelessness and hunger remained at levels not seen since the depression.

Launching the union’s thinktank Working NSW on December 3, Reich told the media that it was “time for the left wing to talk about morality in terms of public morality” and declared, “social justice, equity, opportunity, overcoming oppression—that is all a fundamentally moral religious message...”

The pressing issues raised by Reich are political, not religious. Their resolution requires an independent political struggle by the working class to bring about a fundamental reorganisation of society on the basis of new social priorities that meet the needs of the majority, not the profit requirements of the few. It is this perspective that Reich, the unions and the Labor party all fervently oppose.



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