

Australia: Why Rudd forced the resignation of union official Dean Mighell

Will Marshall, Terry Cook
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On May 29, Labor Opposition leader Kevin Rudd successfully pressed for the resignation of Electrical Trade Union (ETU) Victorian state secretary Dean Mighell from the Australian Labor Party.

Rudd moved against Mighell within hours of the Murdoch tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, airing a secretly-taped recording of the union official telling a closed membership meeting in Melbourne last November that he had pressured employers into giving a 4 percent pay increase by threatening strike action.

The hardly startling revelation was accompanied by information that Mighell had allegedly used bad language at the meeting when referring to employers and officials of the Australian Building and Construction Commissioner (ABCC)—the Howard government’s anti-worker building industry watchdog.

With astonishing speed Rudd rushed to be interviewed on Sky News. He announced Mighell’s resignation and then denounced him declaring, “when it comes to any form of unacceptable behaviour, particularly of the language that we’ve seen reported in today’s press, and it’s now been confirmed, then we take firm and decisive action. That’s what I’ve done”. Rudd described the union official’s comments as “obscene at every level”.

Rudd could hardly have been shocked by Mighell’s language—it is standard coin in official political circles and, undoubtedly, among construction employers as well.

Nor is Mighell the “firebrand” or “maverick” depicted by the *Telegraph*. Like every other union official, the long-time union bureaucrat, despite his militant posturing, has faithfully acted within the industrial framework determined by big business and its political representatives. Even the media, as it hysterically attacked Mighell’s behaviour, admitted he

had not stepped outside current industrial relations laws during the wages dispute.

At Labor’s recent national conference, Mighell joined the entire trade union contingent to vote for the party’s Industrial Relations (IR) policy, *Forward with Fairness*, which contains draconian anti-strike laws identical to those of the Howard government.

Having earlier co-sponsored an open letter to delegates urging them to reject the policy, Mighell announced during the conference that he would now back it—out of loyalty to “left” deputy leader and workplace relations spokesperson, Julia Gillard, and to help Labor win the federal election. (It appears the same concerns prevented a single union figure from raising any serious opposition to Mighell’s forced resignation.)

Even the subject of Mighell’s boasting—last year’s 4 percent pay increase—fell well within the employers’ acceptable limits. Federal government statistics published this week reveal, for example, that non-union collective agreements for the March quarter delivered an average 3.9 percent pay rise. Significantly, union-negotiated collective agreements won a rise of just 3.7 percent during the same period.

Rudd’s real purpose in witchhunting Mighell was to send a clear message to the corporate elite that an incoming Labor government will act ruthlessly to suppress any opposition by workers against cuts in wages and conditions. What he refers to as “unacceptable behaviour” is any mention of even limited strike action against employers.

The Labor leader’s message was quickly backed by his “left” deputy Gillard, who told a press conference the next day: “I would remind people in this room, I am from the political party that deregistered the BLF (Builders Labourers Federation). Any suggestion that

Labor's track history isn't one of insisting on tough compliance is a suggestion that simply doesn't pass the test of analysis. So we will be tough".

The deregistration of the BLF was a filthy operation carried out in 1986 by the Hawke-Keating Labor government, in league with the state Labor governments and the national trade union leadership, to destroy a militant union. This was part of a concerted campaign to discipline and break up the most militant sections of the working class and impose Labor's pro-market agenda.

Rudd's axing of Mighell comes in the wake of a relentless media campaign during the past two months demanding Labor openly fashion its IR policy in line with the dictates of big business.

Murdoch's *Australian* has led the pack in accusing Rudd and Gillard of being "captive" to the unions. The purpose is to pressure Labor into overturning its pledge to abolish Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs)—statutory non-union individual work contracts enshrined in the Howard government's hated industrial relations laws, WorkChoices.

Typical was the *Australian's* May 25 editorial claiming Rudd had "caved in to the demands of the trade unions at the ALP conference in April" and describing him as "the dinosaur, saddled with a 19th-century industrial relations policy based on an 'us and them' mentality of class warfare, collective bargaining and unfettered union power".

These claims are laughable. Under Liberal and Labor governments alike, the unions have uniformly acted as industrial policemen, suppressing workers' struggles and functioning as the employers' accomplices.

Just one indication of their role was this month's Australian Bureau of Statistics figures showing the ongoing decline in the level of strike activity. In the year from March 2006, the number of days lost due to work stoppages halved compared with the previous year. Between March 2006 and March 2007, there were just 136 disputes involving stoppages, the lowest annual number since 1933. The number of working days lost was 109,500—the lowest since records began in 1913.

Despite this record, significant sections of employers want collective agreements scrapped altogether. That is why they are pushing for Labor to embrace AWAs or some other form of statutory non-union agreements.

They regard these as a better, more direct mechanism for imposing cuts to working conditions.

Rudd and Gillard's continued ambiguity on AWAs and their support for union-negotiated collective work agreements is bound up with an attempt to maintain the unions as labour bargaining agencies and to offer them as the best means for enforcing employer demands. Abandoning this position could lead to a loss of union support—in particular financial support—for Labor in the vital period leading up to the federal election.

Even so, the position of the two Labor leaders continues to evolve: they have recently, for example, made a 180-degree about-turn and pledged to retain the notorious Australian Building and Construction Commission until 2010. The ABCC has been the vehicle for significant attacks on construction workers instigated by the construction industry.

The *Australian* has already indicated its qualified approval. In an editorial on May 31, it heralded the ditching of Mighell as a "good start on the road to proving Labor's economic credibility".



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