

Australia: Labor “rank and file” meeting—no perspective to fight electricity privatisation

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A gathering in Sydney on February 16, billed as a “rank and file” Australian Labor Party (ALP) meeting to oppose the NSW Labor government’s plans to sell-off key sections of the state’s electricity industry, had nothing to do with developing a genuine campaign.

Backed entirely by the federal Labor government of Kevin Rudd, Premier Morris Iemma intends to privatise the state’s electricity retail arms, Energy Australia, Integral Energy and Country Energy, and lease out the electricity generators, Delta Energy, Macquarie Generation and Eraring Energy, hoping to raise \$15 billion.

The meeting was called to provide a cover as the trade unions and Labor officials move behind the scenes to allow the sell-off to go ahead in the face of intense public opposition. Since the privatisation plan was revealed last December, workers at power generating stations in NSW’s Hunter region have held rolling stoppages and called for a strike and picket of the NSW parliament on February 26.

Notably, not a word of criticism was made at the meeting of Rudd, who last week came out to specifically support Iemma. The speakers demonstrated again that no section of the Labor leadership, at any level, opposes the pro-market programs of the state and federal Labor governments.

The term “Labor rank and file” was bandied about to give the illusion that the ALP is an organisation that has active working class support and democratic processes. Nothing could be further from the truth. The party is little more than a bureaucratic shell whose membership consists mainly of well-heeled politicians, party staffers, trade union functionaries and careerists. This was illustrated by the fact that just 200 attended the meeting despite the threat that the power privatisation poses to the jobs, working conditions and living standards of working people.

Another indicator of Labor’s decay came when Newcastle Trades and Labor Council assistant secretary Joan Dawson declared that she spoke for all 480 ALP members in the Hunter Valley region, which is the heart of the state’s power generation network and was once a Labor stronghold with many thousands of members.

The meeting offered no perspective other than limited protests, beginning with a watered-down “community rally”

outside parliament on February 26, to pressure the Iemma government ahead of the Labor state conference in May. All present were aware that state Treasurer Michael Costa has already vowed to ignore any conference resolution and proceed with the sale regardless.

The overriding concern of the speakers on the platform was to prevent the development of a broad movement of working people that will inevitably come into conflict with both the Iemma and Rudd governments. Any defeat for Iemma will be a blow against the federal Labor government’s plans for a new wave of pro-market “economic restructuring”.

Opening the meeting, Labor state president and Electrical Trades Union state secretary Bernie Riordan demonstrated his contempt for the concerns of ordinary working people, declaring that the meeting could not go beyond two hours, because he had to attend a sporting event. No one present objected.

Riordan’s first concern was to downplay Rudd’s intervention. Last week, Rudd told the media that Iemma had his “complete support”: “I understand how politically problematic it is, but we need to make sure that we get proper generating capacity for the state for the future.”

Declaring that it was “hard to disagree with Rudd’s principal sentiment” that the “nation needed a secure power supply,” Riordan suggested that Rudd, “may be unaware that unfortunately the privatisation will not generate a single extra watt of generation”.

Rudd supports Iemma’s privatisation plan, not out of technical ignorance but because all Labor’s leaders are fully committed to an agenda of “reforms” demanded by the financial and corporate establishment, including further opening up the public sector to private profiteers. The NSW electricity “reform” is simply the first cab off the rank.

Riordan conveniently omitted to mention that on December 17, after a meeting of Rudd’s cabinet, federal Treasurer Wayne Swan told the *Australian*: “We [the cabinet] support the Premier of NSW in his efforts to increase investment and competition in the nation’s electricity market.” Energy Minister Martin Ferguson, a leading figure in Labor’s “Left” faction, declared that Iemma had the backing of all state energy ministers.

Another speaker, Public Service Association assistant secretary Steve Turner, admitted there were “many more parts of the public sector up for privatisation” but insisted that privatisation “had been defeated in 1997 and could be again”.

Iemma’s predecessor Bob Carr beat a tactical retreat on power privatisation in 1997 when an ALP state conference voted down the proposal. Instead, the Carr government carved up and corporatised the electricity sector, eliminating thousands of job in the process, with the assistance of the unions.

The partial backdown followed the Keating government’s landslide defeat in the 1996 federal elections. The main concern of Carr’s “opponents” was that the state government was facing an election within a year and could suffer a defeat if the privatisation went ahead. With no federal or state election currently on the horizon, no such considerations exist, and Iemma and Rudd are determined to carry through unfinished business.

Joan Dawson cynically told the meeting that Labor’s platform still called for “the democratic socialisation of industry”. The ALP has never been based on socialist policies. In the past, it advocated limited industrial and social reforms in order to contain workers’ struggles within the framework of the profit system. Today, Labor and the unions are the mechanism for ripping back past concessions. Far from socialising industry, federal and state Labor governments have a record of closing down or selling off public assets.

Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating governments, backed by votes at special party conferences, privatised major enterprises such as the Commonwealth Bank, Qantas and the Williamstown Naval Dockyard. Labor governments in NSW closed all the state’s rail workshops and outsourced maintenance work, with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

Senator-elect and former Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron resorted to demagoguery. He said the period reminded him of that “Dickens thing”—“the best of times and the worst of times”. “In Canberra,” Cameron declared, “the Rudd government is taking over the reins of power and apologising to indigenous Australians”. He lauded Rudd for “rolling back WorkChoices”, the Howard government’s industrial relations laws. “(B)ut the Iemma government in NSW is trying to sell off valuable assets.”

The Rudd government’s formal apology to the Aboriginal “stolen generations” on February 13 was an empty and cost-free gesture, allowing Labor to posture as a progressive alternative to the Howard government and to provide a cover for deeper attacks on the social conditions of working people.

As for “rolling back” Howard’s IR laws, Labor’s platform *Forward with Fairness* retains most of WorkChoices’ measures, including draconian anti-strike laws and severe restrictions on workers’ rights to challenge unfair dismissals. Cameron, along with every other senior union official, voted for the platform at the ALP’s national conference last April.

Cameron asked: “When members of the party get into power and pursue economic fundamentalist policies in contravention of party policy, what are the checks and balances? How do the rank and file fight back?”

Economic fundamentalist policies—a pro-market agenda to abolish all restrictions on the drive for profit—do not contravene Labor Party policy. They have been the program of every Labor government for more than two decades. Cameron was part of the drive to enforce this agenda under a series of “accords” between the unions and the Hawke-Keating governments.

It is little wonder that when Cameron listed the proponents of free-market economics—Reagan, Thatcher, Kennett, Howard and Costa—he forgot to mention Hawke and Keating, or the self-proclaimed “economic conservative” Rudd.

Cameron called for “more power in the hands of the rank and file”. After he spoke, however, the meeting was hastily closed without any opportunity for “rank and file” discussion. No genuine debate could be tolerated, even in this forum, that could raise the need for an alternative perspective. A resolution was put that restated opposition to the power sell off but proposed no further action except the February 26 rally, indicating that its real purpose is to let off steam and then wind down the campaign.

The fight to defeat the drive to privatisation and the deepening attacks on social conditions requires the mobilisation of a political and industrial movement in complete opposition to the Labor and union leadership. The struggle must be based on a socialist perspective that challenges the very framework of the profit system. It must raise the demand that publicly-owned utilities be placed under the democratic control of those who work in them and of working people generally, so that they are organised and operated according to social need, not corporate profit.



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