

Australia: Labor conference endorses war and “sacrifice”

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The Australian Labor Party concluded its three-day national conference on Saturday with a tribute to former Prime Minister Bob Hawke and a unanimous endorsement of a “long-term” Australian military commitment to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The two moves highlighted the main aim of the conference: to send a message to its primary constituency—the corporate elite and the media—that the Rudd government was committed to offloading the burden of global recession onto the working class and to pursuing its ongoing neo-colonial agenda.

Speaking on Sunday on ABC TV’s “Insiders” program, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard underscored the purpose of the highly-orchestrated affair. “We are a political party in government, we have accepted that responsibility and that’s what you saw on show,” she declared.

There was not even the semblance of opposition or debate. Every vote at the three-day gathering was unanimous. No differences were expressed. Not even the token and symbolic debates of previous conferences were allowed. Every speaker who took the floor saluted the Rudd government and hailed its policies. Underlining its hand-picked character, the conference attendance was the lowest in living memory. Two entire sections of the hall were covered with black cloth to try to disguise the lack of delegates.

Saturday’s resolutions on Afghanistan demonstrated the essential continuity between the Rudd and Howard governments. While the previous Coalition government was a critical part of Bush’s “coalition of the willing” in Iraq, the Labor government has become an unconditional partner in Obama’s escalation of the war in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan.

The platform adopted by the conference specified a

“long-term commitment to international efforts to stabilise Afghanistan” and a “comprehensive engagement with Pakistan”. In moving the platform and a special resolution on Afghanistan, Defence Minister John Faulkner, a leading member of Labor’s “Left” faction, foreshadowed a further boosting of the number of Australian troops there, beyond the increase to 1,550 announced in May. He did not put any time limit on the involvement of Australian troops in the criminal, neo-colonial war.

The final day also saw effusive tributes to Hawke as he was given life-time party membership. Introducing the former prime minister, Rudd hailed Hawke as “one of our heroes” and the “heart and soul of our party”. Hawke, he said, had shown how to “bring the nation together” to deliver a reform agenda of “vast achievements”.

In an essay published just prior to the conference, Rudd had already made crystal clear that his government would press ahead with the pro-market agenda demanded by big business to impose the brunt of the global economic crisis on working class. The real purpose of Hawke’s appearance was to highlight the continuity of Rudd’s policies with those of his Labor predecessor.

In the 1980s, Hawke carried through a far-reaching assault on the wages, conditions and union rights of working people, and also joined the first Bush administration in invading Iraq in the first Gulf War of 1990-91. Working hand in hand with both big business and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Hawke and Treasurer Paul Keating cut real wages, overturned hard-won protective working conditions, smashed the Builders Labourers Federation and used the air force to break the 1989 pilots’ strike.

Hawke said that he had begun his government with a

summit of business, union, welfare and church leaders to obtain a “mandate for change”. At that meeting, no commitment had been more important than that given by the trade unions to forego wage rises. To thunderous applause, Hawke paid tribute to the unions for providing a “sense of sacrifice and wanting to be part of changing Australia”.

The Rudd government is pursuing the same pro-business agenda. One of the most graphic examples is Labor’s treatment of the more than a million workers who are now unemployed or under-employed workers, with the numbers still growing daily. After a stream of ministers and other delegates had hailed the government for delivering “adequate” aged pensions by increasing the single rate by \$30 a week, a Victorian delegate, Robert Hudson, mentioned the fact that the jobless and sole parents received \$5,000 a year less, and had to exist on \$32 a day.

Far from challenging the government policy, however, Hudson moved an amendment stating that in providing income support during periods of unemployment it was essential to “ensure that financial barriers to work are removed and that incentives to participate in the workforce are enhanced”. In other words, social security benefits must be kept low so that the jobless have no choice but to accept jobs on any terms. Like every other amendment, it had been vetted in advance and was readily accepted.

The remaining motions on the final day underlined the Rudd government’s continuation of the Howard government’s attacks on basic democratic rights. Under the guise of combatting terrorism, the adopted platform states: “Labor will ensure Australia has tough anti-terrorism laws.” The only amendment, proposed by Philip Boulten, a barrister who has opposed aspects of the terrorism laws in the past, was to say that people accused of a criminal offence should not be subject to “prolonged” detention without charge. Like every other amendment, it presented no challenge to government policy and was agreed.

Likewise, the platform pledges to retain the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, complete with the “architecture of excised offshore places” introduced by the Howard government in 1999. Under the excision regime, refugees are intercepted and transported by the navy to the remote Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island, where they are detained and processed outside

the Australian legal system, with no rights to appeal to tribunals or courts if their asylum applications are rejected.

The prospect of a conference debate on same-sex marriages was quickly nipped in the bud. Attorney-General Robert McClelland explained that any such move was out of the question because Labor valued the support of the “faith-based communities” to whom it had made a commitment not to “undermine the institution of marriage”. Like Howard before him, Rudd has cultivated the Christian fundamentalist constituency as a base of support for his government’s right-wing agenda.

The government’s contempt for democratic rights was underscored by the heavy police presence surrounding the conference to prevent any disruption to the stage-managed proceedings. Throughout the three days, the conference was guarded by a visible force of armed state police in commando uniforms, as well as a less visible contingent of plainclothes federal police.

Protest reached the conference floor on only one occasion. A dozen environmental demonstrators stood below the platform with their mouths taped in a silent gesture against Labor’s carbon emissions trading scheme, which subsidises the coal industry. As soon as they left the hall, federal police detained two of the protesters for questioning.

The entire conference is a warning to the working class, not only about the Labor government’s reactionary agenda, but also the methods that will be used to impose it.



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