

Australian unions' desperate attempt to bolster Labor

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14 May 2010

Australian workers could not be blamed for believing they were in a time warp when the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) launched a multi-million dollar campaign late last month entitled “Work Choices: Whatever the Name, Never Again”.

The campaign includes expensive television commercials featuring workers testifying that they lost working conditions and basic rights under the Work Choices industrial relations regime of the previous Liberal-led government of Prime Minister John Howard.

The commercials show the current Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott declaring in a recent speech that “the phrase Work Choices is dead” with a voice-over warning that only the name is dead, not the policy.

In the lead up to the 2007 federal election, the ACTU ran a “Your Rights at Work” campaign with similar ads. Its purpose was to corral the growing opposition to Howard’s Work Choices and to promote the Labor Party, which promised to abolish the legislation if it won office.

The Howard government is long gone. But Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has replaced Work Choices with its own Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation, which has retained or toughened all the essential features of the previous laws.

With a federal election looming later this year, the ACTU has launched its new campaign in a desperate bid to shore up flagging support for Labor by raising the spectre of a revived Work Choices. However, its

campaign slogan—Work Choices: Whatever the Name, Never Again—is inadvertently an indictment of the Rudd government’s Fair Work Australia and the role of the trade unions in enforcing it.

Labor’s legislation strengthens the anti-strike provisions of Work Choices. It outlaws all industrial action—including strikes, partial stoppages, go-slows, overtime bans and work-to-rules—except during the limited bargaining periods for enterprise agreements. Secret ballots must be held before any strike, a process that can take weeks. Details of any proposed action must be provided to employers allowing them to plan strike-breaking. Even then, the Fair Work Australia tribunal can block a strike on the basis that “good faith bargaining” has not taken place.

Like Work Choices, any industrial action in solidarity with other sections of workers, or over broader economic, social or political issues is prohibited. Strikes to oppose privatisation, job cuts, plant closures, victimisation or state repression against workers are also outlawed. Workers, who infringe FWA provisions—such as the construction workers at the Woodside’s Pluto LNG project who struck in January for eight days to defend basic conditions—face massive fines and even imprisonment.

The ACTU has not opposed any of these measures, which is not surprising as all of the unions voted at the 2007 Labor Party national conference in favour of the Fair Work Australia framework. The ACTU’s main criticism of Work Choices was that by encouraging individual contracts it was sidelining the unions. By protecting collective bargaining, the Labor government ensured a continued role for the trade unions and their

support in enforcing the FWA legislation.

Labor has also retained the Howard government's Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), which has extraordinary police powers to investigate and prosecute construction workers. The ABCC will be replaced with a specialist department within FWA which will be armed with the same powers. The unions have criticised the ABCC but have conducted no concerted campaign to demand its complete abolition.

With the assistance of the trade unions, Labor's FWA apparatus has been used to back employers and suppress key struggles, including by construction workers on the Melbourne's West Gate Bridge site, paramedics in Victoria, Qantas baggage handlers, Telstra and Australian postal employees—all fighting to defend long-standing working conditions.

Moreover, by binding workers hand and foot, Labor's laws have encouraged employers to take aggressive action of their own. There have been a series of punitive lockouts, including in the casino, food processing, mining, health, and construction sectors, against workers engaged in action during the so-called "protected" period allowed under FWA laws.

Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard, who has overseen the implementation of the FWA, has repeatedly demonised workers and sided with employers. "Unlawful industrial action is wrong," Gillard arrogantly declared earlier this year in response to the Pluto strike. "People should expect to be punished; they should expect to feel the full force of the law; no apologies, no excuses, full stop."

The ACTU current campaign to turn Abbott into a bogie man to stampede workers behind Labor is a sham. The unions have not defended the rights of workers, but have functioned as the industrial policemen for Labor's FWA regime. If Abbott were to win the next election because of widespread disgust with Labor and its policies, the unions would continue to collaborate in suppressing opposition in the working class.

It should be recalled that Howard's ability to implement Work Choices depended on 13 years of betrayal by the previous Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Enterprise bargaining, workplace restructuring, privatisation and the end of the eight-hour day had all been implemented by Labor with the backing of the unions. When Labor was thrown out at the 1996 election, the ACTU quickly reached a modus operandi with the Howard government as it extended Labor's "reforms". It would do the same if Abbott came to power.

The necessary political conclusions should be drawn. Liberal and Labor both serve the interests of finance capital and the corporate elite. Whichever comes to power after the next election will be compelled to make far deeper inroads into the social position of the working class as the global economic crisis continues to worsen.

Workers can only defend their living standards and basic rights by breaking from the two-party system and by mobilising independently on the basis of a socialist perspective and for a workers' government. That necessarily involves a rebellion against the entire system of industrial laws and against the unions that enforce them.



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