

Australia: Electrical union members disaffiliate from Labor

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Members of the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) have voted overwhelmingly to disaffiliate from the federal Australian Labor Party (ALP) in state-wide balloting that ended this week. Nearly 44 percent of the union's 16,000 members voted, with 5,946 backing disaffiliation and just 1,000 against. One of the immediate outcomes of the vote will be to deprive the ALP of about \$100,000 in annual affiliation fees from what is one of Victoria's largest blue collar unions.

The vote is a sharp indication of mounting hostility within the working class toward the Labor government. The disaffiliation ballot was conducted over three weeks, opening on June 28, just four days after Julia Gillard was installed as prime minister in a backroom coup orchestrated by Labor's factional apparatchiks acting at the behest of key sections of big business. As ETU members were returning their ballots, Gillard was announcing a series of right-wing measures, including the junking of her predecessor Kevin Rudd's "super-profit" mining tax. She was scapegoating refugees and immigrants, issuing her unconditional support for the occupation of Afghanistan, and pledging a new wave of "free market" economic reform, specifically targeting health, education, child care and other basic services.

There is no doubt that these developments fuelled the disaffiliation sentiment among ETU members already opposed to the Labor government's record in office since 2007. Gillard has long been an especially despised member of the government—as workplace relations minister she was the architect of the Fair Work Australia regime which enshrined the key aspects of the former Howard government's Work Choices laws, and extended anti-democratic provisions against the right to strike. A significant number of ETU members in Victoria have had direct experience with Fair Work Australia, with many prohibited from taking strike action in defence of wages and conditions in different workplaces, including Ford Australia earlier this year, and others in the building industry being subject to Labor's construction "watchdog", the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

While ordinary ETU members saw the disaffiliation vote as an opportunity to register their opposition to the Labor government, as far as the union itself is concerned, the measure is nothing but a cynical manoeuvre designed to head off workers' mounting anger, politically containing it within the safe parameters of the parliamentary system, and ultimately within the Labor Party itself.

The ETU's state council and state secretary Dean Mighell called for a "yes" vote in pre-polling statements, declaring, "The federal ALP government has failed workers and our families on WorkChoices, an emissions trading scheme to protect our environment, the insulation

scheme tragedy, the retention of the ABCC (Taskforce), workers getting ripped off under award modernisation."

Mighell and his ETU colleagues represent a section of the trade union bureaucracy that is highly conscious of the political vacuum that has opened up amid growing anger and hostility within the working class toward the Labor Party. The ETU is concerned above all else to prevent a politically independent movement of the working class emerging in direct opposition to Labor and the trade unions. This is why Mighell has for several years been engaged in various efforts to prepare new political mechanisms whose function is to divert the seething discontent.

In the first instance this involves maintaining a close relationship between the ETU and the Labor Party, in defiance of the membership's wishes. Following this week's vote, Mighell quickly declared to the media: "Our members are smart enough that it's not an anti-ALP result. That's not what the ballot is about; it's about how the union positions itself as an independent voice going forward."

Mighell stressed that the disaffiliation from the federal Labor Party would not affect the union's relations with the pro-business state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. He declared the ETU remained "a strong supporter" of the state government and Brumby, who "had done a good job".

At the same he provided cover for Gillard and the coup plotters. Asked earlier this month if he thought Gillard becoming prime minister was a "good thing," Mighell replied: "Absolutely. I think it gives a chance, a slim opportunity, for federal Labor to behave like a Labor party. The opportunity is there to get out of the shadow of Rudd and articulate the things that she truly believes in. In the past Julia Gillard has been a strong pro-worker advocate."

This absurd lie has been accompanied by active ETU support for individual federal Labor candidates deemed to "care about the interests of ordinary working people". At the same time, Mighell has already extended a hand to the Liberal-National opposition, arguing that the ETU's disaffiliation from Labor could allow a closer relationship between the union and the conservative parties. He declared in an op-ed piece published by the Fairfax press in February: "I would seriously question if their stance on trade unions would be as severe if unions were not an intrinsic part of their political rival."

One aspect of Mighell's disaffiliation calculations is that of offering whichever government is in power, Liberal or Labor, the union's services as an official labour bargaining and industrial policing agency. Earlier Mighell had argued that disaffiliation would allow unions to become "Australia's most powerful lobby group".

More prominent in these manoeuvres with the major parties, however, has been the ETU's promotion of the Greens.

The union has called for a vote for the Greens in the Senate and in the lower house electorate of Melbourne, which the Greens hope to win away from Labor. Mighell made clear that this was aimed at pressuring a re-elected Gillard Labor government. “We would hope if the Greens have the balance of power [in the Senate] that they can convince Labor to do what Labor ought to do, and implement Labor policy, strangely enough, to get workers’ rights back on the agenda in this country.”

The notion that “implementing Labor policy” would involve defending workers’ rights is another blatant lie promoted by the ETU. The reality is that the Labor Party is an unalloyed representative of big business and finance capital and is set to unleash an intensified assault on the social position of the working class after the next election. Far from representing any alternative to this, the Greens is a thoroughly bourgeois party, committed to upholding parliamentary “stability” and working closely with both Labor and Liberal. Developments in Tasmania, where the Greens have formed a coalition government with Labor, point to the growing alignment of all the parliamentary parties nationally.

Mighell’s wretched manoeuvres have received the backing of the various middle class ex-left protest organisations, which have sought to promote him as a champion of the working class. This reflects both the class basis of the ex-lefts, whose hostility to the working class is only matched by their enthusiasm for the trade union bureaucracy, and the political calculations of Mighell and company who know that in the event of a significant political shift, their promotion of Labor and the Greens may no longer prove tenable and that the ex-left “radicals” may be required to play a more prominent role in diverting the working class from a revolutionary perspective.

Unions direct agencies for the corporate elite

Affiliated to Labor or not, the trade unions, the ETU included, are both unwilling and incapable of leading an independent struggle, or of defending even the most basic interests of the working class.

In the period of the post-war boom, the unions were able, despite their defence of capitalism and their national programs, to extract limited wage concessions and social reforms, so as to contain the class struggle within the confines of the profit system. Under conditions of the globalisation of production, however, the unions in Australia and internationally have abandoned their national reformist perspective and undergone a fundamental transformation into direct agencies of the corporate and financial elite, working to tear back all the past gains of the working class.

Like all other unions, the ETU under Mighell’s leadership has collaborated with both Labor and Liberal governments, federal and state, working to prevent or betray every struggle in defence of jobs, living standards and workers’ rights. Along with all other affiliates of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) the ETU collaborated with the Hawke-Keating governments from 1983 to 1996 to drive through a fundamental restructuring of the workplace that resulted in the wholesale dismantling of longstanding working conditions and the smashing up of the most militant sections of the working class—including in strongholds in Victoria.

Under the Howard government from 1996 to 2007, the unions worked to sabotage key struggles in the construction, power and manufacturing industries against job cuts, contract labour and outsourcing including at Yallourn Energy in the Latrobe Valley and at BHP Steel’s Victorian coil and coated products factory at Western Port. The union’s policing role has continued under Labor. Just last month, Mighell and the ETU, along with the Australian

Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), played the crucial role in blocking a unified struggle by workers at Ford Australia’s Broadmeadow and Geelong plants and ramming through a new enterprise work agreement that undermined pay and conditions.

Despite the ETU’s criticisms of Labor, and of the employers, the union in fact has the closest working relationship with both. Mighell sits alongside government and construction company representatives on the tripartite Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC) established in 2001 by the state Labor government. Among the council’s aims are to “improve Victoria’s construction productivity” and “encourage initiatives to facilitate investment in Victoria”.

Put more plainly, the BICC seeks to increase the profits of construction companies and make Victoria attractive to international investment through the ruthless driving up of productivity and the ever deepening assault on working conditions and wages.

The ETU and construction unions have direct material interests in promoting this agenda. Senior union bureaucrats serve on the boards of multi-billion dollar superannuation funds. In these unelected and highly paid positions, the union functionaries direct investments in building industry projects and other business ventures. Just last month, Cbus, the fund for the construction, building, infrastructure and allied industries and CONNECT, covering electrical and communications industry contractors, announced a merger, creating a \$14.7 billion fund. Senior ETU figures serve on the boards of both funds.

To conduct a fight against the assault on jobs, working conditions, and basic rights that is set to intensify irrespective of which party wins government after the August 21 election, workers must make a conscious break from the trade unions, the Labor Party, and their various backers, including the Greens and the ex-left tendencies. A turn must be made toward the development of new organisations of struggle—rank and file workplace committees organised independently of the unions—and to the building of a new mass party of the working class guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective. This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.

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