

# Australia: Once more on the ETU disaffiliation

Terry Cook  
7 August 2010

In a state-wide ballot ending last month, members of the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) voted overwhelmingly to disaffiliate from the federal Labor Party. The vote undoubtedly reflects the deep hostility not only among ETU members, but also throughout the working class to the Labor government and its pro-business agenda.

The fact that the union's state leadership recommended a "yes" vote has been seized on by various ex-left organisations to encourage illusions that the ETU state council and its state secretary Dean Mighell offers a progressive alternative for workers.

According to these outfits, the ETU leadership has demonstrated that it is in the forefront of fighting against Labor's pro-market agenda, including its draconian Fair Work Australia industrial laws. Furthermore they claim that the disaffiliation is proof that the unions can be revitalised to represent the interests of workers.

Typical is an article by Socialist Alliance national convener Peter Boyle in the *Green Left Weekly* (GLW) on July 24. While Boyle is forced to acknowledge that "unfortunately most union leaders are muffling any public criticism of the Labor government" he declares: "There are some exceptions—notably the Victorian Electrical Trade Union leadership."

Boyle praises the disaffiliation move as "a ground-breaking step to liberate the still powerful trade union movement in this country from the ALP". Later he claims that it shows "the union movement can win its political independence and the means to rebuild and strengthen itself".

Boyle's claim that ETU is establishing its "political independence" is nonsense. The ETU was not an unwilling captive of the Labor Party struggling to break free. On the contrary, like every other union, the ETU shares the pro-market politics of the Labor Party and has collaborated closely with governments—Labor and Coalition—in imposing this agenda on the working class.

In proposing a formal organisational break, the ETU leadership is simply seeking room to manoeuvre. The union recognises that decades of Labor betrayals have eroded working class support for the ALP and created a dangerous political vacuum that has to be filled to prevent workers turning to an alternative socialist perspective.

The ETU is seeking to pull together a new political mechanism to channel working class opposition back into the safe waters of the parliamentary system, and ultimately into the Labor Party itself. State secretary Mighell has worked to establish relations with so-called independents and the Greens, a bourgeois party committed to upholding parliamentary "stability" and defending the profit system.

Mighell has also cultivated the various former radical groups such as Socialist Alliance to bolster his "left" credentials. They have dutifully hailed Mighell's call for a vote for the Greens in the Senate and in several lower house seats. Socialist Alliance uncritically reports Mighell's claim that if the Greens gain the balance of power in the upper house it will pressure a re-elected Labor government to "get workers' rights" back on the agenda.

The claims that the Greens will act as a brake on Labor, or that Julia Gillard can be pressured to defend workers' rights are a fraud. Gillard was installed last month as prime minister in a backroom coup to remove former leader Kevin Rudd in an operation orchestrated by Labor's factional apparatchiks acting at the behest of big business, including the major mining companies.

A Gillard government has been tasked by the corporate elite, not with putting "workers' rights back on the agenda", but with implementing a savage austerity program. What is being prepared is a new wave of pro-market restructuring aimed at further dismantling social services, including health, education and child care, and with slashing jobs, wages and working conditions.

The Greens are offering themselves as a reliable partner in implementing this program. The party reached a sordid

backroom deal to swap preferences with Labor not only to boost their own chances, but to help Labor across the line in what is likely to be a close result.

Greens' leaders openly boast about their record in imposing unpopular pro-market policies when in government in the state of Tasmania between 1989 and 1992. They have also made clear that the new Labor-Greens coalition in Tasmania is a proto-type for collaboration with Labor at the federal level after the August 21 poll.

The Socialist Alliance's attitude to the Greens is identical to that of Mighell. The party is calling on workers to "vote Socialist Alliance and Greens—put Abbott (the opposition Coalition) last" declaring "this sums up the best fighting stance for the labour movement and progressives".

Once again, Socialist Alliance is advocating preferences and votes to the Greens then Labor on the basis that the ALP is a "lesser evil" as compared to the Coalition. On every front, however, from support for the Afghan war to pro-market education policies and the vilification of refugees, the Rudd government continued and deepened the anti-working class policies of the previous Howard government.

That is also the case with the democratic rights of workers. During the 2007 election, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) backed by all the unions ran a phony "Your Rights at Work" campaign against the Howard government's WorkChoices industrial relations laws, encouraging workers to vote for Labor to overturn the legislation. Once the election was over, the unions, including the ETU, lined up to support Labor's Fair Work Australia laws that were even more restrictive and punitive than the legislation they replaced.

Yet Socialist Alliance continues to promote this fraud. In an article in the July 25 edition of *Green Left Weekly*, correspondent Sue Bolton uncritically reports Mighell's comments hailing the 2007 ACTU campaign as "the most effective political campaign in the country's history, not fought by political parties but by the union movement." These remarks were made as the ACTU is running a second edition of its campaign, trying to pull the wool over workers eyes that Gillard represents a lesser evil as compared to Abbott.

Mighell also promotes the illusion that Gillard might improve Labor's industrial laws. As reported in the July issue of *Solidarity's* online journal, he commented: "In a position of power she hasn't done anything near enough to help workers' rights. The Fair Work Act is basically just retaining Work Choices with a coat of paint. But to be honest I wouldn't be surprised if there's no change." But Mighell quickly adds: "The question is—was this at Rudd's request? Or is it

something she decided was her new policy?"

As her ousting of Rudd made clear, Gillard was not simply a puppet carrying out his orders. She was intimately involved in drawing up the Fair Work Act, in close consultation with big business, and in its ruthless implementation. As industrial relations minister, she slandered Westgate Bridge construction workers as thugs, denounced strikes by Pluto workers as "illegal" and supported crippling fines in a series of disputes. In the course of the election campaign, Labor has made clear that it will keep its punitive regime in place.

Workers should reject the unprincipled manoeuvring of the ETU and Mighell with contempt. Whatever the outcome of the August 21 election, the next government will intensify the assault across the board on the social position of the working class. Workers can only defend their rights and living standards through a rebellion against the unions, which have collaborated closely with governments—Labor and Liberal—to suppress any independent movement of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for a decisive break with the unions and a turn to the construction of new organs of struggle, in the first instance rank-and-file committees in factories and workplaces. Militancy, however, is not enough. An independent movement of the working class will only go forward to the extent that it is guided by a socialist perspective to reorganise society to meet the needs of the majority, not the wealthy few. This is program that the SEP is fighting for during and after the election.

*The author also recommends:*

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[6 August 2010]

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