

Australian unions commit to Labor's austerity program

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Last weekend's Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference highlighted the dependence of the Gillard government on the trade unions to enforce its program of public spending cuts and corporate restructuring, which will mean the destruction of basic working conditions and thousands of jobs.

Throughout the set-piece "debates," the union representatives made clear their determination to bolster the deeply unpopular Labor government and implement its pro-business agenda against rising opposition in the working class.

The unions, which appointed half the conference delegates, form the backbone of the factional fiefdoms that installed Julia Gillard as prime minister in June 2010. The National Right faction rests on unions such as the Australian Workers Union (AWU), while the Left faction is based on nominally "left" unions, including the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and Maritime Union of Australia (MUA).

Much of the government itself consists of former senior union bureaucrats, including Resources Minister Martin Ferguson, Regional Development Minister Simon Crean and Climate Change Minister Greg Combet—all ex-leaders of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and Assistant Treasurer Bill Shorten, a former AWU national secretary.

In the week before the conference, the government had announced that in order to meet its pledge to the financial markets to eliminate the budget deficit produced by the global financial crisis, it would impose \$11.6 billion worth of new cuts to public spending over the next four years. These measures are expected to cost at least 3,000 public sector jobs.

Far from opposing this offensive, CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood, whose union covers most federal and state public servants, made no mention of the assault on her members, instead joking that it had been a "tough week for me." She said she had been engaged in "a lot of talk" with the relevant minister, Finance Minister Penny Wong, a fellow member of the Left faction. The CPSU has joined a

government working group to discuss how to implement the cuts.

Flood seconded a Left faction amendment that merely suggested that the government be prepared to review its budget surplus promise if the global economic crisis intensified. She declared that the government had "so much to be proud of," including its "gutsy" role in stimulating the economy during 2008-09.

In reality, the government spent billions of dollars to shore up the banks and big business during that period, a price that it now being extracted from public sector workers, and the working class as a whole.

Before the conference, the ACTU had claimed that the unions would push for changes to Labor's draconian Fair Work Australia industrial legislation. This legislation, which the unions endorsed at previous ALP conferences, outlaws all strikes except during formal bargaining periods and then with severe restrictions. Employers, on the other hand, can lock out workers without notice.

An ACTU media release on November 22 said the unions had "resolved to vigorously defend workers' rights against a new wave of employer militancy that is threatening the livelihoods of working Australians." This followed Qantas's grounding of its entire fleet to force an end to limited protest actions by pilots, engineers and ground crew—an unprecedented move backed entirely by the Labor government—in order to pursue a sweeping restructuring at the initial expense of at least 1,000 jobs.

Having already called off all action by Qantas workers, the unions' vows proved worthless at the ALP conference. They agreed to a single platform amendment, negotiated with Workplace Minister Chris Evans, that sought to strengthen the hand of the unions to stifle any eruption of industrial action and impose binding arbitration by the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal. The amendment made several suggestions for the government's forthcoming review of the Fair Work Act, most significantly for arbitration "as the final step of the dispute settlement procedure" in enterprise agreements.

Compulsory arbitration is a tool that has been used by the Labor and union bureaucracy in Australia for more than a century to bind workers to rulings handed down by industrial judges. These judges, falsely depicted by the unions as “independent umpires,” invariably issue verdicts that enforce the requirements of the government and business, as specified by the industrial legislation itself.

Speaking in favour of the amendment, ACTU secretary Jeff Lawrence expressed “appreciation” for the consultative process. He looked forward to “unions, the party and the government working together on these issues.” In other words, the unions will step up their collaboration with the government as it works with big business to use the Qantas precedent to restructure and slash labour costs.

The “left” unions dropped their previous pretences of opposing aspects of the government’s Fair Work regime. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) national secretary Dave Noonan praised the government for belatedly moving a bill to abolish the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), a draconian enforcement agency against building workers established by the former Howard government, even though the bill simply transfers the ABCC’s coercive powers to the Fair Work apparatus.

Throughout the conference, the unions pushed a reactionary nationalist line, seeking to blame foreign workers for the offensive being mounted by Qantas and other major Australian companies. MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin declared that “foreign guest workers” on offshore mining projects were being “treated like the royal family” to “come in and take our jobs.”

The truth is that Australian employers are exploiting these workers, in a bid to match the cheap labour conditions imposed on workers throughout Asia. That is the real meaning of Gillard’s insistence on the need to compete in the so-called “Asian Century.”

Union resolutions called for bans on immigrant labour, along with “local content” provisions, to defend the profits and viability of Australian companies. Through their diatribes against foreign workers, the unions are working to pit Australian workers against their Asian colleagues. These organisations are organically hostile to any fight to unify the struggles of workers internationally in the common fight to overturn the profit system itself.

In the same vein, Transport Workers Union (TWU) national secretary Tony Sheldon, who is also ALP vice president, successfully moved an amendment to Labor’s platform to reinforce provisions requiring majority Australian ownership of Qantas, which was privatised by the Keating Labor government in 1992. Sheldon then issued a TWU media release hailing the “overwhelming support

shown by the Labor Party to the workers and families involved in the ongoing dispute with Qantas/Jetstar management.”

Far from protecting workers, the major Australian corporate owners of Qantas are mounting an offensive on behalf of the country’s business elite as a whole. As for the pretence of ALP support for workers, the Qantas confrontation, together with the recent mass sackings at BlueScope Steel, is regarded by the Labor government as a crucial test of the “transition” that Gillard has promised to slash working class conditions across the board to “internationally competitive” levels.

There was another display of nationalism outside the ALP conference. The TWU and other airline unions organised a Qantas protest lobby that featured Bob Katter, a right-wing Queensland MP whose recently-formed “Katter’s Australian Party” stands for an Australia based on “Christian values” and protection of “the social and economic fabric of the Australian people.”

Katter was a long-time member of the National Party, the rural-based coalition partner of the Liberals, before he quit to run as an independent in 2001. He has a long record of combining populist denunciations of free trade, and demands for farming and small business subsidies, with rabid attacks on the democratic rights of immigrants and minority groups. (See: “Electrical union promotes right-wing MP Bob Katter” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/jan2011/migh-j20.shtml>)

The embrace of Katter by the unions is a warning that their deepening collaboration with Labor’s ruthless pro-business program will be accompanied increasingly by the promotion of Australian chauvinism. This nationalism—which is, in fact, the founding program of the unions and ALP—serves only to pitch Australian workers into a fratricidal conflict against their Asian and international counterparts as the intensifying crisis of global capitalism threatens all their lives and livelihoods.



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