

At union summit, Australian PM promotes phony jobs campaign

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday addressed an Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU) "community summit" to promote her bogus campaign as a champion of jobs and workers' rights and consolidate the backing of the unions for her election campaign. She again attacked "foreign workers", while also announcing that the Labor government would pass new legislation enshrining penalty wage rates for casual workers.

Gillard and the trade unions have worked hand in hand with big business to spearhead a sweeping restructuring of the Australian economy. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been destroyed in recent years in manufacturing and other sectors under pressure from the appreciating dollar, while corporate profits and productivity rates have been ratcheted up through speed ups and other measures extracting greater output from the workforce. Through these processes, social inequality has reached record levels and the hostility and disgust felt within the working class towards the Labor Party has never been greater.

Gillard has responded by picking up and developing a xenophobic "jobs" campaign that had been initiated by the trade unions. At the beginning of the month the prime minister spent a week in western Sydney—where joblessness and financial distress is among the most extreme in Australia—and chauvinistically denounced the 457 visa scheme that allows skilled workers into the country on a temporary basis.

Gillard maintained the reactionary campaign yesterday in her speech to the ACTU summit. "I offer absolutely no apology for putting the opportunities of Australian working people first, front and centre, wherever they were born," she declared. "Labor's policy on Australian jobs is to put Australian workers first. If there are local workers—Australians in insecure

work, unemployed Australians, young Australians—who can do these jobs then they should get that chance."

Pledging stricter conditions on the issuing of 457 visas, including wider English language requirements, Gillard denounced the use of the temporary workers in the information technology and health sectors. She declared it "absurd" to bring in "overseas labour" for skilled positions in hospitals, while "contracted local labour cleans those same hospitals in the middle of the night ... we don't want to be a nation which can't care for its own sick and can't provide jobs for its own kids."

Gillard combined this attempt to channel mounting social tensions into antiforeigner channels with a pitch to concern within the working class over job security and casualisation.

The ACTU summit was held under the banner "Creating Secure Jobs and a Better Society", and was part of its push to lower the rate of casual employment. Casual and contract labour now comprises 27.9 percent of the Australian workforce—second only to Chile within the OECD. A vast decline in permanent employment has been deliberately engineered by successive Labor and Liberal governments in order to provide business with greater "flexibility" in their operations. As a result, more than 2 million workers have no employment security, no superannuation or benefits such as sick leave and holiday pay, and little opportunity of securing a mortgage or other personal loans.

The union bureaucracy is concerned that the casualisation rate is undermining its dues base, and also fuelling class tensions that threaten to erupt outside of its control. ACTU president Ged Kearney opened the summit on Wednesday with a warning that the situation was "eating away at social cohesion" and threatening

the “social compact”.

Gillard responded by pledging to incorporate within the industrial relations Fair Work Act new provisions supposedly protecting overtime payments for casual workers. Declaring a “new policy to improve the living standards and the working conditions of the insecure millions”, she said that in future, penalty rates, overtime, shift work loading and public holiday pay would be “definite, formal considerations for the Fair Work Commission when it sets award rates and conditions”. The prime minister concluded: “When working people around the world have lost so much and when austerity measures overseas have hit so many so hard, Australians have more rights at work than before.”

This rhetoric is absurd on every level. The new legislation, even if enacted as proposed, will make no difference to existing overtime and penalty conditions for casual workers. The Fair Work Commission already sets these conditions. University of Adelaide law professor Andrew Stewart, who helped the government draft its industrial laws, described Gillard’s proposal as “largely symbolic”. Workplace Relations Minister Bill Shorten today assured business it had nothing to fear. “What we’re not going to do is say that double time and a half on public holidays is something which is passed by law in parliament,” he declared. “I don’t believe it’ll automatically change people’s penalty rates; what it will do is give an explicit direction to the independent umpire to bear it in mind.”

Business groups and the media nevertheless denounced Gillard’s proposal, fearing that it will undermine their long standing campaign to slash workers’ wages in the retail, tourism and hospitality sectors.

For Gillard, however, the policy is another politically calculated gesture towards the trade unions, whose continued backing is crucial to her own survival as prime minister. This year she has appeared at numerous union conferences and events, and responded to some of the bureaucracy’s policy demands, such as more protectionist measures for manufacturing as demanded by the Australian Workers Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (see “Australian prime minister announces bogus jobs plan”).

Key union bureaucrats helped install Gillard in mid-2010 through the Labor Party coup against Kevin

Rudd, and their continued support is crucial amid continued speculation of another imminent leadership challenge. The prime minister is also conscious that the Labor Party—now a hollowed out apparatus without any mass membership base—requires the financial and organisational support of the trade union bureaucracies in order to mount an effective campaign ahead of the September election.



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