Rudd promotes “jobs” fraud at Labor Party campaign launch

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The Australian Labor Party’s official campaign launch on Sunday—just six days before the election—was a desperate affair. The event was held as the Labor government faces the prospect of election defeat, and barely 500 “party faithful,” mostly candidates, family members and staffers, gathered to hear a last-ditch appeal for support by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The set-piece launch was held in Brisbane, Queensland, where Rudd’s initial hopes of making electoral gains appear to have been dashed. A number of prominent Labor figures are likely to lose their seats in the state on Saturday, including former Treasurer Wayne Swan. Even Rudd’s own seat is under a cloud. Only two sitting prime ministers in Australian history have ever lost their own seats, Stanley Bruce in 1929 and John Howard in 2007.

Several cabinet ministers from other states also facing the loss of their seats, including Treasurer Chris Bowen, Assistant Treasurer David Bradbury and Resources Minister Gary Gray, chose to campaign in their electorates rather than attend the Labor campaign launch.

Every aspect of the event spoke volumes about why the Labor Party is discredited and reviled among workers and young people. Pride of place in the front row was given to ex-prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, who received standing ovations. Keating was introduced as “Australia’s greatest treasurer.” Hawke and Keating’s promotion was intended to send a signal to the corporate and financial elite, underscoring the continuity between Rudd’s policies and Labor’s 1983–1996 record of pro-market economic restructuring, privatisations, and undermining of working-class jobs, wages, and working conditions.

Rudd was rehabilitated as Labor leader in June in a bid to avert the complete electoral wipe-out and possible disintegration of the Labor Party anticipated under Julia Gillard’s leadership. The broader agenda behind his installation was to orchestrate a shift to the right in domestic policy, developing more authoritarian forms of rule and implementing sharper economic restructuring and austerity measures. Rudd has been working closely with the trade unions to enforce a new “productivity” agenda of slashing wages and conditions, with the regressive deal recently imposed on auto workers at General Motors Holden hailed as a model to be emulated across the economy.

None of this was mentioned at Labor’s launch. Instead, the prime minister fraudulently presented the election as a choice between Labor’s support for jobs and the Liberal-National coalition’s plans to “cut the future to ribbons,” via secretly prepared spending cuts. The reality is that Labor has presided over an avalanche of job destruction throughout basic industry, sending the official, grossly understated, unemployment figure over the 700,000-mark. It has also entrenched a budget strategy of permanent cuts, already targeting single parents, the disabled, public servants, and the university sector.

Rudd declared that the “core” of his “vision for the Australia of the 21st century” was that everyone had the right to “a good job ... with fair wages and conditions.”

His only new policy announcements had nothing to do with providing jobs, let alone decent-paying jobs. Instead, he pledged to establish a new super agency, Jobs and Training Australia, complete with “Jobs and Training Boards” across 42 regions, tasked with forcing the jobless into work that meets local employer requirements. He also promised a $10,000 tax break to small businesses—a $200 million handout over four years—to help them take on low-paid workers.

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Rudd postured as an avowed opponent of state government cuts to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) funding. In fact, the deep cuts being imposed by the states and territories flow directly from Labor's deliberate program of outsourcing vocational education to cut-price corporate providers, as part of the government's "education revolution." Since Labor took office in 2007, student numbers at TAFE have declined nationally, while the proportion of the "market" captured by private colleges has doubled, from 14 to 28 percent.

Likewise, Rudd proposed to slightly increase apprenticeship tool grants, from $5,500 to $6,000, which he said would help 70,000 apprentices. This will be of little use to apprentices, who face a devastating combination of soaring TAFE fees and poverty-line wages. Less than half of apprentices finish their apprenticeships today, making a mockery of Labor's 2007 pledge to create 700,000 new training places.

Regardless of whether Labor or Liberal forms the next government, the vicious job and public spending cuts will accelerate as the global economic crisis worsens. Cynically, in an obvious pitch for votes, Rudd yesterday claimed that he wanted to "revisit" the Labor government's cutting off of sole parent payments once children turn eight—which has cost single parents up to $100 a week—"as soon as budget circumstances permit." Rudd's caveat only underscores Labor's true intent: to wipe off the budget deficit as soon as possible in order to satisfy the financial markets and corporate elite.

The media, including Rupert Murdoch's outlets, praised Rudd's launch. The *Australian* 's editorial declared: "With an address more stirring than Labor had any right to expect, Kevin Rudd has at last given shape to the party's manifesto by framing Saturday's poll as a choice between jobs and cuts." The newspaper also lauded Rudd for "setting a new benchmark for political frugality" by issuing election promises worth just $268.5 million over the next four years, compared with Abbott's total of $305 million at the Liberal Party launch a week earlier.

Throughout the official election campaign, the Murdoch media has relentlessly denounced Rudd, campaigning for a Liberal-National government with a substantial parliamentary majority. Now, with this appearing the most likely election outcome, there appears to be an effort to shore up Rudd a little, again aimed at preventing a landslide defeat for the Labor Party and thereby shoring up the two-party parliamentary system used by the ruling class to maintain its rule.

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