

Australian Labor Party members to vote on new leader

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The contest underway for the Labor leadership marks a desperate attempt to breathe life into a decaying corpse. Following the protracted political crisis during the Rudd-Gillard governments, Labor received its lowest vote in more than a century in last Saturday's federal election. Now there is a conscious effort within ruling circles to promote the rival candidacies of former industrial relations minister Bill Shorten and ex-deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese as proof of a flourishing internal Labor Party democracy.

For the first time, Labor Party members will play a role in the selection of the leader, with a membership ballot given a 50 percent weighting, and the other 50 percent of the total vote allocated to parliamentarians. About 30,000 party members are expected to be eligible to vote, in a process spanning several weeks.

This new mechanism formed part of revised procedures implemented by Kevin Rudd after he was reinstalled as prime minister in June. Exploiting the hostility within the working class towards the antidemocratic 2010 coup, in which Labor and trade union factional powerbrokers suddenly removed him from office, Rudd promoted the "reforms" as a breakthrough for democracy.

In fact the opposite was the case. The primary purpose of the new leadership mechanisms, as Rudd acknowledged, was to make it nearly impossible to remove a Labor leader, once installed, allowing him or her to ignore public opinion and impose the diktats of big business and finance capital without fear of reprisal.

Now, these authoritarian mechanisms are being promoted in an effort to endow a new Labor leader with an air of legitimacy and popularity.

Bill Shorten has long been promoted by the media as a future prime minister, and was the first to nominate for the leadership following the election rout. But he remains tarnished by the stench of the 2010 coup, when he was the most prominent of the factional powerbrokers that axed

Rudd and installed Julia Gillard. Then this June, after spending three years as the head of Gillard's "Praetorian guard," Shorten suddenly shifted back to the Rudd camp, entrenching his reputation as a self-promoting factional operator.

After the election defeat, Shorten reportedly moved quickly and secured the backing of the most important factions within the Labor and union apparatuses. However, there was widespread concern within the Labor Party and the media that if Shorten went unchallenged and was installed via the factions, without a membership ballot, he would be regarded as an illegitimate leader. This is why Albanese's nomination yesterday was widely welcomed. Acting Labor leader Chris Bowen claimed that because of the ballot, "Whoever is the Labor leader will have more legitimacy than any other leader ever."

Both candidates are tried and tested representatives of the corporate and financial elite.

The media has promoted Albanese as a left-wing figure, playing up "Albo's" background as a son of a single mother on the disability pension, growing up in a council flat. In reality, the former deputy prime minister is a creature of the ruthless New South Wales Labor factional machine. He first cut his teeth in student politics as a protégé of the Stalinist-backed "left" Steering Committee and a factional virulent opponent of Trotskyism.

Within the Rudd-Gillard governments, he served as infrastructure minister—promoting "public-private partnerships" that provided lucrative opportunities for corporate investors in public infrastructure projects—before being rewarded for his loyalty to Rudd with the deputy prime ministership after Gillard was ousted earlier this year.

At his press conference yesterday, Albanese evaded repeated requests to identify a single policy issue differentiating him from Shorten.

The two figures have stated they are determined to

defend the record of the Rudd-Gillard governments. Albanese yesterday declared that the Labor Party had made a mistake after losing office in 1996, when it had attempted to distance itself from the pro-business, “free market” policies of Hawke and Keating that triggered record social inequality and unprecedented anti-Labor sentiment within the working class. Albanese insisted that, like the Hawke-Keating governments, Rudd and Gillard had led “good governments” which “history” would regard highly.

Albanese made no attempt to explain why the Labor Party received a record low vote. The remarks underscored the reality that, regardless of whether Shorten or Albanese wins the leadership, there will be no retreat from the party’s right-wing orientation.

Sections of the press have also attempted to promote Shorten as a working class hero, to even more absurd effect. Shorten enjoys close ties with the financial elite. After attending one of Australia’s most exclusive schools, he completed a law degree before joining the Australian Workers Union (AWU) bureaucracy, becoming its national secretary when he was 34.

Shorten cultivated various personal relations within ruling circles, with his first wife the daughter of a senior business and Liberal Party figure, and his second and current wife the daughter of Governor General Quentin Bryce. He was close friends with the late billionaire Richard Pratt. In 2006, Pratt lent Shorten his private jet to fly to Beaconsfield, Tasmania where a mine collapse killed a coal miner and trapped two others underground for two weeks. Shorten used the opportunity to build his public profile, becoming the media face of the Beaconsfield disaster, and entering the federal parliament a year later.

During his tenure as AWU chief, Shorten was hailed by corporate chiefs in the steel, mining, and other sectors for suppressing strikes and enforcing job cuts. At the same time he graduated with an MBA from the Melbourne Business School. In a revealing exchange on talkback radio earlier this year, Shorten declared that he had experience in running a business, referring to the AWU. He explained that “you’ve got to run a profit” and “you have to go and find your customers” [these “customers” being union members].

Between 2011 and 2013, Shorten was industrial relations minister, enforcing the government’s draconian Fair Work legislation. He personally intervened into several industrial disputes, assisting the trade union bureaucracy push through sell out agreements, such as the

Victorian hospital nurses’ struggle in 2012.

An important factor in the Labor leadership outcome may prove to be Shorten’s very close ties with Washington.

These were revealed with WikiLeaks’ publication of US diplomatic cables. One of these, sent from Canberra to Washington in June 2009, detailed a meeting that Shorten organised with the US Consul General, effectively in order to demonstrate his leadership credentials. The cable noted that Shorten “makes no bones about his ambitions in federal politics,” previously spent time in the US “collaborating with the United Steel Workers union” and was “widely known for his pro-US stance.”

Washington played a direct role in the 2010 coup, working to remove Rudd and install Gillard in order to more closely align Australia’s diplomatic and military stance with the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China. Shorten was one of a network of US assets within the Labor and union apparatus who orchestrated the leadership change. After the cables were leaked, Shorten rushed to the defence of his colleagues who had been outed as US embassy “protected sources.” Referring to then senator Mark Arbib, Shorten declared: “I completely reject the idea that he is a spy. I just think that’s nonsense.”

Albanese and Shorten, together with the entire Labor caucus, are now emphasising the need for “unity.” Labor MPs have attributed their election defeat to infighting within the former government, explaining the divisions on the basis of rival egos and personal ambitions. In reality, the internecine tensions that tore apart the Rudd-Gillard governments reflected real contradictions wracking the Australian ruling class, above all those generated by the strategic dilemma of where to line up amid escalating tensions between US imperialism and China. As the global economic crisis further worsens, and geopolitical tensions grow sharper, these divisions will inevitably find reflection within the crisis-stricken Labor Party, regardless of who is next installed as leader.



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