

Australian Labor Party leadership contenders hold first debate

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25 September 2013

Rival candidates for the Labor Party leadership, Bill Shorten and Anthony Albanese, last night held their first debate ahead of a party membership ballot that closes on October 9. The event formed part of Labor's desperate attempt to regain some support within the working class, after registering its lowest vote in more than a century on September 7. At the same time, the debate covered up the record of the Rudd-Gillard governments and the issues involved in the 2010 coup that removed Rudd.

The media is continuing to promote the leadership contest as a great episode in the "democratisation" of the Labor Party, with the membership for the first time playing a role in the selection of its leader. Last night's debate, however, underscored the reality that Labor has evolved into a hollowed-out bureaucratic apparatus. Held in central Sydney, Australia's largest city, around 500 people attended the debate, with the average age around the mid-50s. Younger Labor and trade union careerists were strategically positioned toward the front of the audience for the television cameras.

Like its social democratic counterparts internationally, the Labor Party has completely lost its former active membership base within the working class after ruthlessly enforcing decades of pro-business policies. Most of the 30,000 Labor members in Australia reportedly eligible to vote on the leadership are "stacks," i.e., paper members added to the books by various factional operators, or an ageing, upper-middle class layer.

The so-called debate between Shorten and Albanese was a stage-managed farce. The first question put by a "rank and file" member had been pre-arranged by Shorten. A taxi driver earlier overheard the leadership candidate issuing instructions over the phone that he be asked what kind of a prime minister he would like to

be. "I would like to be known as the PM for the powerless, for the disempowered, for people who don't have a voice in society," Shorten declared in the debate. No doubt many of the other questions were similar set-ups.

Both Shorten and Albanese issued numerous empty statements, insisting that the Labor Party represented the disadvantaged. Shorten promoted the former government's National Disability Insurance Scheme, which he played a prominent role in implementing, and declared he would "speak up for" the carers of the disabled, people on disability pensions, as well as victims of domestic violence.

When Labor was in power between 2007 and 2013 it attacked many of the most vulnerable layers of society. Disabled workers seeking the disability pension were hit with draconian new tests restricting access, forcing many, including those with serious mental health problems, onto the Newstart unemployment allowance. When he was in government, Shorten refused to countenance any increase to the \$249-a-week Newstart payment, explaining that the unemployed might "no longer have an incentive to work" if they weren't in such desperate poverty.

The Labor government also impoverished tens of thousands of single parents by stripping them of parenting payments and forcing them onto Newstart. Both Shorten and Albanese now describe this decision as a "mistake," though neither has pledged to reverse the measure if elected to office.

The disability insurance scheme, like the former government's school funding scheme that both Shorten and Albanese promoted in the debate, was not a "progressive" reform. Under the guise of enhancing care services for the disabled, the Labor Party opened up a new lucrative field for corporate profit making,

enacting a voucher scheme within which companies bid for the “business” of looking after those with disabilities. This formed part of a wider agenda to privatise and open up for corporate profit whole new areas, including in education, health, childcare and aged care.

Shorten and Albanese served as loyal hatchet men within the most right-wing Labor governments in the post-World War II period. If they were in office now, they would be pursuing the same pro-business austerity agenda as Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his colleagues.

Both candidates insisted that Labor had to be even more sensitive to the needs of business. Both defended the illegal anti-refugee measures implemented under Rudd and Gillard, again promoting the bogus “humanitarian” rationale of preventing deaths at sea by deterring further voyages.

Overshadowing last night’s debate, and the entire leadership contest, are the inner-party divisions that produced the Labor coup in 2010. Kevin Rudd was suddenly removed as prime minister at the hands of a group of party and trade union factional chiefs, including Shorten, working in close collaboration with the US embassy in Canberra.

Shorten declared that he wanted to “rule a line under the divisions of the past.” Albanese echoed this, insisting it was necessary to “draw a line under past divisions and move forward.” Both candidates sang hymns to party “unity” and heaped compliments upon one another.

However, while neither Shorten nor Albanese directly mentioned the coup, nor Rudd’s subsequent re-installation just ahead of this month’s election, the underlying tensions continue. Albanese pointedly declared that only he could “provide the unity required,” highlighting Shorten’s role as a pivotal factional leader in ousting Rudd, then reinstalling him.

Neither contender attempted any explanation of what caused the divisions between Rudd and Gillard. Again the issue was presented as a personality problem. In a shot at Rudd, and by implication Rudd supporter Albanese, Shorten declared that he would lead a “team,” adding that the “era of the Messiah is over,” referring to Rudd’s claimed popularity with the public.

The bitter rifts within the Rudd-Gillard governments reflected real and unresolved contradictions, above all:

How should Australia align itself amid sharpening tensions between its longstanding diplomatic and military ally, the US, and its most important economic partner, China?

Gillard was installed by US “protected sources” in the Labor Party and unions after Rudd sought to mediate between the rival powers and broker some sort of power-sharing arrangement in the region based on US imperialism ceding a degree of strategic influence. Gillard instead fully aligned Canberra with the Obama administration’s “pivot” to militarily encircle China and maintain unchallenged US dominance. The tensions generated by the provocative US strategy have only escalated since Obama announced the pivot in the Australian parliament in 2011.

None of these issues were raised last night. Not a single remark or question concerned foreign policy. The “debate” was a cynical exercise from start to finish in covering up the anti-working class record of the Labor governments in order to try to arrest its decay and decomposition.

The author also recommends:

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[14 September 2013]



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