

Australian Labor Party installs Bill Shorten as leader

Patrick O'Connor
14 October 2013

Bill Shorten, a former trade union bureaucrat and confidante of the US embassy in Canberra, was yesterday installed as the new leader of the opposition Australian Labor Party. He will maintain Labor's unconditional backing of Washington's geostrategic and military manoeuvres around the world, including President Obama's aggressive "pivot" against China. At the same time, Shorten will orchestrate a further lurch to the right at home, promoting policies aimed at advancing the interests of big business and finance capital.

As part of the new Labor leadership election rules—introduced by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd after he replaced Julia Gillard in June—two ballots for the leadership were held, one of the parliamentary caucus and one of the party's membership. Each bloc was assigned a 50 percent weighting. Shorten narrowly prevailed over rival candidate Anthony Albanese, the so-called "left" faction's former deputy prime minister and infrastructure minister, after winning the support of 55 out of the 86 Labor MPs. This margin proved greater than Albanese's win in the membership ballot, where Shorten received just 40 percent of the 30,000 votes submitted.

The voting process was absurdly hailed by both the leadership candidates and their colleagues as a major step forward in the "democratisation" of the Labor Party. The ballot instead provided another demonstration that Labor long ago collapsed as a mass party of the working class. Three decades of right-wing, "free market" policies, beginning with the 1983-1996 Hawke-Keating governments and continued with the Rudd-Gillard governments, culminated in Labor registering its lowest vote in more than a century in the September 7 election. Moreover, for all the talk about "empowering" what remains of Labor's narrow and

ageing membership base, Shorten won the leadership despite losing the members' ballot, courtesy of Labor's right-wing faction chiefs delivering him the necessary caucus votes.

Shorten now enjoys sweeping authority as opposition leader, with the new Labor leadership rules ensuring that he cannot be removed unless at least 60 percent of his caucus colleagues decide he has "brought the party into disrepute." This provision was introduced, as Rudd openly explained earlier this year, in order to give the Labor leader a free hand in promoting policies that are opposed by working people.

Both Shorten and Albanese pledged to work for Labor "unity," again heaping praise upon one another, as the new Labor leader pledged a "new day" for the party. The Labor Party is desperate to rule a line under the bitter divisions between the Rudd and Gillard camps that wracked the Labor government between 2007 and 2013.

Shorten was among the key architects of both the June 2010 coup that installed Gillard as prime minister, and of the switch back to Rudd four months ago. During the leadership contest with Albanese, Shorten attempted to counter his public reputation as a ruthless and self-serving factional powerbroker by insisting that he had made "tough decisions" for "the good of the nation."

Neither Albanese nor anyone else in the Labor Party or the media challenged Shorten on the real issues behind the 2010 coup, or over his secret collaboration with Washington in the lead up to Rudd's axing. Not one of the televised debates between Shorten and Albanese during the leadership campaign, including an hour-long discussion on the ABC's "Q&A" program, featured a single question related to foreign policy.

As was raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the

time of the coup, and was later amply documented by the leaked US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, Rudd's removal in 2010 was orchestrated with Washington's approval in order to engineer a shift of Canberra's foreign policy alignment. Whereas Rudd had sought to mediate between US and Chinese strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific, Gillard fully lined up behind the Obama administration's provocative drive to diplomatically and militarily encircle the rising Asian power. Shorten was among the factional "faceless men" who worked closely with Washington in the lead up to the coup, passing on confidential information about internal government divisions that were kept secret from the Australian people.

One diplomatic cable in June 2009 was devoted to a profile of Shorten, who was reported by US embassy officials as being "widely known for his pro-US stance." Shorten later defended his colleagues exposed as US "protected sources" by WikiLeaks. Referring to then senator Mark Arbib, he declared: "I completely reject the idea that he is a spy. I just think that's nonsense."

In Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten, the Obama administration now has two of the most pro-US politicians in Australia, ensuring continued bipartisan backing for US imperialism's predatory operations in the Middle East, East Asia, and around the world.

At home, Shorten's win has been praised by business lobby groups and by the Murdoch and financial press.

Shorten has long-standing personal connections to the upper echelons of corporate Australia. An ambitious social climber, Shorten went from law school into the Australian Workers Union (AWU) bureaucracy, becoming its national secretary when he was 34, while at the same time securing an MBA from the Melbourne Business School. His first wife was the daughter of a senior business and Liberal Party figure, and his second and current wife is the daughter of Governor General Quentin Bryce. He is close friends with John Roskam, head of the Institute of Public Affairs, a Liberal Party-aligned "free market" think-tank. Shorten also cultivated a friendship with the late billionaire Richard Pratt, who lent him his private jet in 2006 so he could fly to Beaconsfield, Tasmania where a mine collapse killed a coal miner and trapped two others underground for two weeks. After using the opportunity to build his

public profile, he entered federal politics in 2007.

Later becoming industrial relations minister, Shorten used the role to advance essentially the same agenda as he had previously as AWU chief—intervening into industrial disputes on behalf of business, suppressing strikes, enforcing job cuts, and cutting real wages.

Under the Rudd-Gillard governments, Shorten denounced any proposal to increase the sub-poverty level unemployment Newstart benefit. He insisted last year that unemployed workers could receive no more than \$243 a week because this provided "an incentive for people to take up paid work" and reflected the government's determination to boost "participation in the workforce."

Shorten also enforced and repeatedly defended the former Labor government's impoverishment of tens of thousands of single parents by forcing them onto Newstart and into low-wage work. His actions had the same purpose: to boost the pool of exploitable cheap labour available to business, thereby suppressing wages and boosting productivity. In a cynical attempt to distance himself from this socially regressive measure, Shorten now claims it was a "mistake."

In fact, the new Labor leader has merely shifted focus, now targeting another vulnerable layer of society, injured and long-term unemployed workers. During the leadership debates with Albanese, Shorten unveiled a new policy proposal, developing a "national rehabilitation strategy" for injured workers who receive the disability support pension or are living on compensation payouts. Shorten wants to compel these workers back into the workforce.

The proposal was hailed by the corporate press. Today both the *Australian Financial Review* and *Australian* issued editorials urging Shorten to go further in agitating for pro-business economic reform and restructuring measures. The new Labor leader has given every indication of his willingness to do so.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact