

Behind Shorten's plans to "rebuild" the Australian Labor Party

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Bill Shorten, the leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), delivered a speech on Tuesday calling for the hollowed-out and discredited organisation to be rebuilt as a "modern, outward-looking, confident and democratic party." He billed his speech as an "honest conversation about why we lost power." Labor was thrown from office in the September 2013 election, in which it received its lowest vote as a percentage of the electorate in 110 years. "If we don't change," Shorten declared, "we are putting our very future at risk."

Shorten presented a narrative in which Labor has lost support because it is an anti-democratic apparatus dominated by trade union-linked factions. He left out of his "honest conversation" the real reason for the hostility toward Labor, which is the anti-working class policies that it implemented. The policies that Shorten did cite in his speech—as examples of why people would "place their faith and trust and hope in Labor"—only served to underscore why working people are utterly alienated from the organisation.

Shorten invoked the introduction of free university education by the Whitlam Labor government in 1974. Barely a decade later, the Hawke Labor government reimposed fees in the form of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, which today charges students a deferred fee of between \$6,000 and \$10,000 per year to obtain a degree.

He also lauded the introduction of compulsory superannuation by the Keating Labor government in 1992. The scheme has been used by government and the unions to work with the employers to suppress wages' growth. It has grown into a \$1.6 trillion plaything of finance, with fund managers, union officials and accountants siphoning off tens of billions each year in fees and the wealthy using it for massive tax avoidance. Its existence is being used to call for the

ending of aged pension entitlements in conditions where workers will never accumulate enough superannuation to sustain their retirement.

Shorten also hailed the cynical apology made in 2008 by the Rudd Labor government to the "Stolen Generations"—Aboriginal Australians who were taken from their families during the 20th century. The worthlessness of the act is demonstrated in the continuing deterioration of the horrifying social conditions endured by the vast majority of the indigenous population, which is the most oppressed section of the Australian working class.

Finally, Shorten named the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) introduced by the Gillard Labor government in 2013 as a "life-changing reform." For disabled Australians, it will change their lives in the form of even greater poverty and exploitation. The NDIS is predicated on the privatisation of disability services and a drastic reappraisal of what constitutes disability. Its stated aim is to push up to 400,000 people currently classified as disabled into the workforce and thereby cut them off the disability support pension (DSP).

Shorten's plan for the democratic renewal of the ALP required a rewriting of its history: "When the Labor Party was born in 1891," he declared, "the vision of its founders was of a membership-based party. But in more recent times, the role of unions within our party has developed into a factional, centralised decision-making role. If we are to renew and rebuild the Labor Party, we must rebuild as a membership-based party, not a faction-based one."

In reality, Labor was a highly bureaucratised organisation from its origins. Formed as the political arm of the unions, it opposed Marxism from the outset and advanced a pro-capitalist and national reformist

program. It promoted class collaboration through the arbitration system and the racist nostrums of “White Australia.” In times of crisis, including the two world wars and the Great Depression, the Labor Party was the chief means for the ruling class to subordinate the working class to the capitalist nation state.

During the economic boom that followed World War II, the party had an active base of support in the working class based on its advocacy of social reforms to improve living standards. Its factional structure, while reflecting the competing interests of various trade unions, was the result of a division of labour—the “right” was most closely connected to finance and business and took its cue from Washington, while the “left,” assisted by the Stalinist Australian Communist Party, used its “progressive,” even “socialist” phrasemongering to deflect criticism and opposition from the working class. The factional struggles were always more about position and parliamentary seats, than policy. The party structures were highly bureaucratic and always mitigated against any genuine democratic involvement of the rank-and-file.

The collapse of support for the Labor Party was a product of the globalisation of production from the late 1970s and 1980s that undermined national reformist programs in Australia and around the world. The “reforms” implemented by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 were not to improve the lot of the working class, but to make Australian businesses “internationally competitive” at the expense of the working class. All Labor factions, especially the “left” supported by the unions and the Communist Party, backed the pro-market agenda and suppressed the opposition as it emerged among workers to the destruction of jobs, wages and hard fought for conditions.

Labor’s active membership and broader support in the working class collapsed as a result, and has never recovered. It was thrown out of government in 1996 and was not re-elected until 2007, then largely on the basis that Labor was a “lesser evil” compared to the Howard Coalition government. Labor support sunk to new lows as the Rudd government began to carry out the agenda of big business.

Following the June 23-24, 2010 political coup inside the ALP that overnight ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister and installed Julia Gillard, Labor lurched even

further to the right, unveiling sweeping austerity measures to slash public spending and fully aligning with the US military build-up against China in the Asia-Pacific.

Shorten now declares that he will democratise the Labor Party. But he was one of the factional strongmen, with intimate ties to the US embassy, who removed Rudd behind the backs of the party membership and the Australian people. In the leadership ballot held in October last year, 60 percent of ALP members voted for his rival, Anthony Albanese, in large part because of Shorten’s record as a factional hatchetman.

Shorten’s proposed “reforms” to the organisation, such as US style primaries to select candidates, have nothing to do with democracy. Rather, in line with the demands of sections of the media and corporate establishment, Shorten is seeking to entrench a parliamentary leadership that is free of the influence of sectional interests such as state branches and trade unions, more malleable to those of the financial and business elite and impervious to opposition in the working class.

The Murdoch media on Wednesday bluntly declared that Shorten has a long way to go to meet its demands. The editorial in the *Australian* dismissed Shorten’s speech as “a fizzer.” While welcoming some of his “timid proposals” to change the structure of the ALP, it asserted that Labor “must renovate its program so that it reflects a modern reform agenda, based on prudent budgeting, market solutions to enhance productivity, individual enterprise and aspiration.” Until it did so, the editorial concluded, Labor would remain “chronically unfit to govern” and be denied support to return to power.



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