

Corporatist agenda of trade unions on display at G20 summit

James Cogan
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Ahead of the G20 Leaders Summit this weekend, a collection of 80 top-ranking and no doubt highly paid trade union officials from 25 countries gathered in Brisbane this week and convened their “Labour 20” or L20 Summit. In their actions and statements, the unions have simply underscored the fact that they were transformed long ago into direct agencies of the corporate establishment and the capitalist state.

The G20 convenes amid a massive intensification in a decades-long offensive against the conditions and rights of the working class internationally. Since the 2008 failure and breakdown of global capitalism, hundreds of millions of workers have been hurled into destitution, while a tiny capitalist oligarchy concentrates ever greater wealth in their hands. The richest 85 people in the world control as much wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the world’s population. The top one percent now controls 48.2 percent of global wealth. World unemployment is over 200 million. Some 840 million workers earn less than \$US2 a day. Health, education and welfare systems are being dismantled. Staggering attacks are taking place on democratic rights and geopolitical tensions provoked by the major imperialist powers threaten to trigger a third world war.

The response of the unions has been to issue another “statement” to the G20 leaders. As in previous years, it politely urges governments: to implement policies that raise low and middle incomes, reduce inequality, strengthen workers’ rights, reduce informal (casual) employment, improve opportunities for women and ethnic minorities, ensure the provision of universal health care, aged care and public services, support youth employment, prevent catastrophic climate change and curb financial speculation and predatory banking activity.

In 2014, the unions have added action to “halt the spread of the Ebola virus” to what is nothing more than a cynical grab-bag of issues that these privileged functionaries know will never be acted on.

Sharan Burrow, the former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and now general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), added to the demagoguery. She told journalists this week: “Governments are prioritising policies which support the interests of big business and not tackling the inequality of wages and rising unemployment.” Governments, she declared, had to “have the courage to turn around the policies of austerity, to realise growth and jobs.”

The fact, known by workers around the world, is that as governments continue and intensify austerity and class war, the trade unions will continue to do what they are currently doing: assisting the ruling elite to stifle opposition and prevent any political challenge to the capitalist system.

The trade unions function in every country as an industrial police force, insisting that workers accept the endless erosion of their conditions in order to be “internationally competitive.” Behind the facade of “international solidarity” supposedly represented by the L20, all of the union apparatuses are nationalist defenders of the profit interests of their “own” corporate elite.

The unions have not been passive bystanders, but active collaborators in the stepped-up assault on wages and jobs since 2008. In the US, the United Auto Workers pushed through two-tier wages that slashed new hire pay by up to 50 percent. Across Europe, the unions have confined resistance to austerity to futile one-day strikes and protests, allowing hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs to be eliminated. In

Australia, the unions opposed even token industrial action against the plans by the car manufacturers to close down the entire car industry. They serve on the planning committees that are organising the “orderly closure” of the plants by 2016-2017 and the flow-on destruction of up to 200,000 jobs.

The L20 Summit epitomises the corporatist and anti-working class character of the unions. Its stated aim is to engage in “inclusive and constructive dialogue” with the business and government representatives that descend on the G20. It is convened to enable union officials to rub shoulders with the corporate and political elite and strengthen their relationships. All of them will be making sales pitches, promoting why major corporations should direct investment to their nation-state and offering guarantees that workers in their country can be made more “competitive” than elsewhere.

The ACTU-sponsored “Working Life” web site commented: “[I]n a sign of how much the two groups representing business and labour strive to work together at this global forum, the L20 and B20 (Business Summit) jointly wrote last week to Prime Minister Tony Abbott with a ‘common message’ for the G20 Summit.”

The only issue at the G20 which has provoked anger from the trade unions is the fact that the Australian government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott did not organise comparable access to political leaders for the union officials as it did for B20 representatives. Sharan Burrow complained: “You can’t talk to one group that is a major actor in the real economy and not the other. Otherwise you create a sense of opposition that is unnecessary.”

Burrow is intimately familiar with preventing what trade unions everywhere regard as “unnecessary” opposition. During her time as ACTU president from 2000 to 2010, the Australian unions prevented any organised struggle against the massive growth of casual, part-time and contract employment across every sector of the economy and the steady erosion of other working conditions.

Burrow and the ACTU were central in channelling the working class opposition that developed from 2005 to the draconian “WorkChoices” industrial laws of the conservative government into the dead-end of re-electing the Labor Party. During 2007, the highpoint of

the unions’ “Your Rights at Work” campaign against WorkChoices, the number of days lost to industrial action was just 47,000—the lowest in the country’s entire history. The unions negotiated with the incoming Labor government to draw up its “Fair Work Australia” laws, which replaced WorkChoices but retained all the key attacks on workers’ rights that it had imposed.

Burrow seamlessly moved in 2010 from heading the ACTU to the post of General Secretary of the ITUC, a body formed in 2006 by a merger of the pro-imperialist and CIA-linked International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the no less right-wing Christian based World Confederation of Labour (WCL).

Today, organising the L20 Summit is one of the principal international activities of the ITUC, in partnership with the OECD’s Trade Union Advisory Council. The body functions around the world to strengthen the privileged middle class layers that populate the union apparatuses that are a critical prop for the corporate elite in suppressing any independent movement of the working class.



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