

Australian Labor Party conference shores up party leader

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Last weekend's Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference was a stage-managed exercise to resurrect the fortunes of the unpopular party leader, Bill Shorten, whose rating in opinion poll approval stands at 12 percent.

The gathering also served to shift the party even further to the right amid a rapidly deteriorating economy and mounting geo-political tensions, particularly an escalating US confrontation with China.

Behind several sham "debates," notably over Shorten's insistence on militarily-repelling refugee boats, the conference unanimously endorsed an agenda of making Australia a base for American war plans against China, imposing "hard" austerity measures on the working class and bolstering the police-state powers of the security and intelligence apparatus.

Labor's last conference, in December 2011, propped up the then leadership of Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Just weeks after a visit to Australia by US President Barack Obama, that conference reinforced the Labor government's unconditional commitment to Washington's military and strategic "pivot" to Asia to confront and encircle China.

Four years on, the 2015 conference was an even more blatant operation to salvage the position of Shorten, an openly right-wing, US-backed and trade union-based party powerbroker. Shorten played a pivotal role in the mid-2010 backroom removal of Gillard's predecessor, Kevin Rudd, who had attempted to convince Washington to reach an accommodation with China, Australian capitalism's biggest export market.

Preoccupied with displaying his stamp of authority over the party, Shorten took the unprecedented step of opening each session of the three-day event with a lengthy "leader's address."

According to the verdicts of the corporate media, the biggest achievement of the 2015 ALP conference was that

Shorten's leadership remained intact! Today's *Australian* editorial declared that Shorten had a "good conference overall" and "bolstered his leadership, at least in the short-term."

Above all, this result was attributed to Shorten's declaration, on the eve of the conference, that a Labor government would continue the Abbott Liberal-National government's use of naval vessels to "turn back" and/or "tow back" asylum seeker boats—a regime that brazenly flouts international law as well as the fundamental democratic right to seek asylum.

This announcement, effectively pre-empting the conference, sent a wider signal of Shorten's intent to deliver whatever policy the corporate elite demanded, no matter how brutal.

Shorten was only able to survive, and prevail, with the active assistance of Labor's misnamed "left" faction, which had a majority at this conference for the first time, allowing it to determine party policy.

At one point, in order to block any threat to Shorten's position, the "left" reportedly considered dropping a proposed amendment rejecting boat "turnbacks." In the end, however, a carefully calibrated one-hour debate was conducted, precisely in order to create the impression of genuine differences of opinion and a healthy democracy inside the ALP, which has long been a bureaucratic shell.

Despite several theatrical speeches of opposition to repelling refugees, journalists were informed in advance that a "left" amendment nominally rejecting the practice would be defeated after a token show of hands.

The gyrations of deputy party leader Tanya Plibersek, a "left" figurehead, provided a particularly cynical example of the political calculations involved. She adopted three positions in a matter of days. First, she accepted Shorten's stand in the shadow cabinet. Then she spoke against it in the "left" caucus. Ultimately, she refused to publicly cast a vote for the "left" amendment.

The fraud of the “debate” was underscored by the essential unity between the speakers for and against the amendment. Each one agreed with the underlying thrust of the policy to stop all refugees fleeing to Australia. The “left” amendment only criticised boat “turnbacks” on the tactical basis that they “undermined” cooperation with Asian governments to block the departure of boats.

All the speakers went out of their way to pledge allegiance to Shorten. Junior parliamentarian Andrew Giles, who moved the “left” amendment, began his contribution by saying: “I want to say how proud I am to be a part of Bill Shorten’s team.”

At a protest outside the conference, members of pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, did their best to keep alive illusions that the ALP could be pressured to adopt a more humane policy. Their media release urged Labor to “exercise political backbone and resurface a morality” and said “we will continue to put pressure on the ALP in every way we can.”

In reality, Labor pioneered the anti-refugee policy under the Hawke and Keating governments of the 1980s and 1990s, which introduced the inhumane mandatory detention regime of incarcerating all asylum seekers in effort to stop boat arrivals, and it has matched or outdone the Liberal-National Coalition ever since.

A further showpiece “debate” on same-sex marriage ended with Shorten, Plibersek and Anthony Albanese, another “left” leader, in a display of unity on the stage. They celebrated a compromise whereby Plibersek and the “left” dropped calls to bind Labor parliamentarians to vote for this elementary democratic right. The outcome underscored the drive to consolidate Shorten’s position while retaining a pitch, based on identity politics, to a largely upper middle class constituency.

Buried in all the media coverage was the adoption, without any dissent, of a foreign policy and “security” platform that repeatedly hails the US as Australia’s “closest,” “enduring” and “essential” ally. Building on the Gillard government’s stationing of US marines in northern Australia, the platform specifically commits Labor to making available to US military forces whatever further facilities, ports and airfields that Washington requires. As outlined in American strategic documents, the “pivot” involves Australia functioning as a platform for war against China, particularly in blockading key South East Asian shipping routes.

In line with this commitment, the platform pledges to boost the resources of the “defence forces, security

agencies, police and emergency services” to meet “the security challenges we face as a nation.” This means increasing military spending and backing ever more powers and resources for the internal security apparatus to suppress dissent.

To underline Labor’s commitment to the new US-led war in the Middle East and the entire fraudulent agenda of the “war on terror,” shadow treasurer Chris Bowen sponsored an amendment to back the Abbott government’s frontline involvement in Iraq and Syria.

Watching over the proceedings, but shielded from public view, were more than 100 banking and other corporate executives whose companies paid \$10,000 a head to lobby and consult with Labor and trade union leaders, netting the ALP’s coffers about \$1 million. This “Business Observer Program”—a feature of ALP conferences since the 1980s—epitomises Labor’s role as a thoroughly corporate entity.

Throughout the conference, Shorten appealed for the support of big business, emphasising Labor’s capacity, in partnership with the trade unions, to enforce “hard economics.” He attacked the Abbott government, from the right, for taking “soft options” that further blew out the budget deficit.

At the same time, Shorten is acutely aware of the depth of hostility toward the Coalition government’s austerity offensive, including cuts to Medicare, pensions and the university system. With an election due by next year, he sought to appeal to the public opposition, claiming that “never has the contrast between us and our [Liberal Party] opponents been more clear.”

The truth is that Shorten, backed to the hilt by the “left” and the trade unions, is seeking to convince the financial and corporate elite that he and Labor are a more reliable vehicle for driving down working-class living standards amid a deepening global economic crisis, while preparing for war and repression.



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