

Australia: Labor Party spells out election campaign of populism and lies

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The reply made last night by Labor Party leader Bill Shorten to the Turnbull government's budget combined populist rhetoric with a carefully-worded pledge to the ruling elite that Labor would better serve its interests than the Coalition Liberal-National parties. His commitment to "budget repair"—turning a \$39 billion deficit into a surplus—demonstrated that his various pledges to reduce social inequality and defend public services are nothing more than a cynical ploy to gain votes and, potentially, win government in the coming July 2 election.

By what he didn't say, Shorten left no doubt that a Labor government would fully commit to the US-led drive toward war with China, and Australian involvement in the US-led wars in the Middle East. Shorten failed to refer to the budget's 3.5 percent increase in military spending, to \$32.5 billion, the projected spending of \$495 billion over the next decade, and \$1 trillion over the next 20 years. Nor did he mention the \$688 million allocated to ongoing Australian operations as part of the US-led neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Labor has fully supported the US "pivot to Asia" since it was announced by US President Obama in 2011, and will collaborate with the next American administration—whoever heads it—in implementing policies that will, unless stopped by the international working class, lead to the catastrophe of a nuclear war.

Shorten's speech highlighted Labor's awareness of the deep anger among millions of ordinary people over social inequality, the crisis wracking essential services such as the public health system, public education and transport infrastructure, and the ever-growing dangers associated with climate change. Labor strategists have clearly studied carefully how US Democratic Party presidential candidate and self-styled "democratic

socialist" Bernie Sanders has made appeals to mass disaffection and alienation to gather political support and keep it confined within safe parliamentary channels.

Shorten began, in this vein, by condemning Turnbull for heading a government for the "millionaires," and bringing down a "budget for big business over the battlers." He zoned in on the Coalition's policies of gradually reducing the corporate tax rate from 30 to 25 percent over the next 10 years and abolishing a temporary 2 percent tax increase imposed in 2014 on individuals earning more than \$180,000. The Opposition leader cited research showing that a working single mother with two teenage children, who earns \$65,000 a year, will be \$4,700 a year worse off, as a result of budget cutbacks to welfare payments, while an individual earning \$1 million will gain \$17,000 after tax cuts. In the course of the election, such comparisons will be aired repeatedly in television, radio and print advertisements. The blatant hypocrisy of Labor's attack on the corporate tax cuts, however, is demonstrated by the fact that its shadow treasurer Chris Bowen has advocated the same policy.

During his reply, Shorten appealed to virtually every major social and political concern within the working class. He claimed that Labor would do everything from taking "real action" on climate change, closing "the gender pay gap", increasing funding for childcare, generating "full employment," pouring billions into rail infrastructure projects, legislating same sex marriage, improving conditions for indigenous Australians, eliminating "the scourge of family violence" and restoring the \$80 billion that was slashed by the Coalition in 2014 from future funding for public health and education.

Shorten's demagoguery, like the government's budget,

is based on fanciful Treasury estimates that the Australian economy will experience at least 3 percent economic growth every year for the next five years—under conditions of a burgeoning global crisis and a sharp downturn in China, Australia’s largest export market and trading partner. In reality, Australian capitalism is sliding into a deflationary slump and toward its first recession in 25 years. Every sector of the economy—from mining, to retail, to the banks—is registering falling profits.

Shorten also failed to mention that the budget’s estimates of growth had been rejected by credit agency Moody’s and ridiculed by a number of media commentators. To do so would have required that he spell out how a Labor government would meet corporate demands for the budget deficit to be reined in through drastic austerity cutbacks to public spending. Instead, the Labor leader traded in lies. However, in his first media interview after the speech, he was caught out and forced to backtrack on the question of health and education funding. Confronted on the issue by Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist Leigh Sales, Shorten refused to commit to restoring the \$80 billion that had been cut.

Fears within the Coalition that Labor’s populist pitch could win support, and result in a historic electoral defeat for the government, were voiced by Treasurer Scott Morrison even before Shorten made his speech. Demanding that Labor tone down its rhetoric, Morrison asserted: “Australians are over this class warfare. They are over the us and them.”

The truth is that the income and wealth gap between the upper classes and the majority of the population is the widest it has been since the 1920s. The working class has been on the receiving end of an endless class war for the past 30 years. Working conditions have been transformed to the point where over 40 percent of the workforce is employed on casual, part-time or contract terms. Aged pensions and social welfare payments have been reduced to below-poverty levels, while hospitals and schools have been starved of funding, to the point where the public health and education systems are on the brink of breakdown, as are the road and public transport systems in most major cities.

Labor’s attempt to win back office by appealing to the mass anger and alienation produced by these

conditions is, from every standpoint, shameless. The Labor Party was in government for 19 of the past 33 years. From 1983 to 1996, with the full support of the trade unions, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments implemented savage economic restructuring that devastated working class living standards and led to the massive growth of social inequality. From 2007 to 2013, the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments pursued a nakedly pro-big business agenda. At both the federal and state level, Labor has presided over the privatisation of essential services and the running down of health and education. Figures like Shorten rose through the ranks of the thoroughly corporatist trade union apparatus and the Labor Party by fully endorsing and prosecuting its class war against the working class.

Shorten’s “spin” and lies reflect, above all, the contempt of Labor for the working class. The party’s entire election strategy is based on the arrogant assumption that workers will ignore the record of past Labor governments and its ongoing commitment to big business and militarism.



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