

Australian Labor's campaign launch features lies and duplicity

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Yesterday's formal election launch by the Labor Party, conducted less than two weeks before polling day on July 2, was a desperate balancing act, designed to reassure big business of Labor's commitment to austerity on the one hand, while falsely promising voters that it would maintain essential services on the other.

In front of a handpicked audience, Labor leader Bill Shorten sought to convince voters—whom he admitted were disenchanted with the existing political set-up—that there was one reason to vote Labor. “I can give you the answer of why politics matters in one word,” he declared. The election, Shorten proclaimed, was a referendum to save Medicare, the government-subsidised health insurance system.

This is a fraud on many levels. It was the last Labor government that stepped up the assault on Medicare in 2013 by freezing the payments made to GP doctors, increasingly forcing them to charge upfront fees to see patients. Yet Shorten sought to claim credit for offering to unfreeze the payments in 2017.

Moreover, two weeks ago Shorten dropped Labor's previous promises to restore the \$57 billion to be stripped from public hospital funding over the next decade. This is the continuation of a long offensive against public healthcare by successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition.

At the same time, Shorten reinforced Labor's appeal to big business, declaring that a Labor government would “not be a big spending government” but one committed to making more “tough” decisions to eliminate the ballooning budget deficit. In fact, he pledged that a Labor government would cut social spending more than the Coalition over the coming decade, vowing “we will pay down the debt faster.”

Over the past three weeks, in a bid to satisfy the

corporate elite, Labor has already responded to the worsening economic situation in Australia and globally by junking promises to oppose or reverse budget measures worth an estimated \$33 billion over the next four years, including deep cuts to welfare, healthcare, education, pensions, aged care and family payments.

Shorten also assured the ruling class of a bipartisan unity on the build-up of the military and the internal intelligence and police apparatus, while staying silent on the preparations for Australian frontline involvement in US-led wars, particularly against China and Russia. With the Coalition having pledged to spend almost half a trillion dollars on military expansion over the next decade, he declared: “In Australia, whatever our political differences, the security of our nation, our commitment to the ADF [Australian Defence Force] and the safety of our people unites us all.”

To reinforce Labor's plea for business backing, Shorten hailed as “legends” three former Labor prime ministers, all sitting in the front row, each of whom the assembled audience gave a rousing reception.

Shorten described Julia Gillard as a “trail blazer for women and girls, a fierce warrior for education and advancement and a continuing inspiration to everyone who fights for Labor.” Paul Keating was a man of “courage, conviction and imagination” and “the one that every other party would like to have.” Bob Hawke had “more fight in his right arm” than “the whole of [Prime Minister] Malcolm Turnbull's cabinet put together.”

Shorten also lionised former Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Bill Kelty, along with Hawke and Keating, as one of the “heroes and mentors” who inspired him.

The Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996, working arm-in-arm with Kelty and the ACTU,

began the protracted assault on the social position of the working class. They systematically restructured the economy to meet the requirements of globalised production and finance, enforcing a wholesale transfer of income and wealth from the working class to the richest layers of society. Through prices and incomes Accords with Labor, and later the imposition of “enterprise bargaining,” the trade unions became nothing more than corporate policing agencies, suppressing the resistance of workers.

After bailing out the banks and finance houses following the 2008 global crash, the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard deepened this process. Under Gillard, sole parents were cut off benefits, an “efficient pricing” mechanism was introduced to drive down public hospital funding, NAPLAN literacy and numeracy testing was imposed on schools in a bid to drive more parents into transferring their children to private schools. In response to corporate demands for even greater cuts, Labor reduced government spending in 2012-13 by the greatest percentage since the 1930s Great Depression.

In particular, Shorten claimed Keating’s mantle. “Our savings plan is built on structural reform, not savage cuts,” he declared. “Paul Keating taught us well.” Shorten insisted that Labor would produce “budget repair that is fair.”

By “structural reform,” Labor means outdoing the Coalition in intensifying the attacks on jobs, working conditions and living standards begun by Hawke and Keating that have enriched the super-wealthy few. Their combined fortunes, according to the annual Rich 200 List, have risen nearly 30-fold, to almost \$200 billion, since Labor commenced the pro-business restructuring.

Today, millions of working class households struggle constantly to make ends meet, facing soaring house prices, utility bills and transport costs, along with deteriorating hospitals, schools and other essential public services. That is the real content of Labor’s “fairness.”

One of the few new initiatives announced in Shorten’s speech was a “jobs tax cut” for small business. This is essentially a subsidised cheap labour scheme. Firms would receive tax breaks of up to \$20,000 a year for hiring sole parents, carers or jobless workers aged under 25 or over 55. Shorten claimed this

would “create around 30,000 new jobs every year.” In reality, employers would simply replace existing workers in order to secure subsidies, all the time undercutting wages and conditions.

For all of Shorten’s efforts, the corporate media demanded far more severe cuts to social programs and working conditions. Today’s *Australian* editorial labeled Shorten’s few remaining spending promises “an unaffordable wish list.” Denouncing Shorten’s populist criticisms of corporate tax cuts, the *Australian Financial Review* accused him of turning the “post-resources boom squeeze on national income into a zero-sum contest of us-versus-them.”

In other words, the full burden of the collapse of the mining boom, which is a sharp expression of the deepening impact of the global economic breakdown that erupted in 2008, must be imposed on the working class as soon as the election is out of the way. Behind yesterday’s phoney rhetoric, this is the attack that a Labor-led government would seek to mount, just as it has spearheaded every offensive by the financial elite in the past.

In direct opposition to Labor, and all those sowing illusions that a Labor government would be a “lesser evil” than the Coalition, the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates are advancing a socialist alternative. To prevent a plunge into social devastation and war, society must be completely reorganised to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our website or Facebook page.

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