

New Australian union head feigns concern for workers' rights

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On March 15, Sally McManus, 45, was appointed secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the peak trade union body in the country. Her predecessor, Dave Oliver, retired on January 31, citing an intention to “spend more time with his family.”

From the outset, McManus has feigned a posture of concern over the decades-long decline in workers' rights and conditions. In sections of the media, she is being promoted, not only as the “first female” ACTU secretary, but as a militant firebrand, intent on reversing the attacks on working-class living standards. The purpose of such coverage is to sow illusions in the largely discredited union apparatus.

The *Guardian Australia*, for example, published an adulatory feature last Wednesday, entitled, “Sally McManus, the ACTU's new leader, vows to take on ‘corporate greed.’” In her interview with the *Guardian*, McManus declared: “If you don't put limits on greed it just gets out of control... We've got to inspire a whole generation who are sick of so much wealth at the top. The system is at breaking point, people don't accept that it's right and fair. I want to change all of that and build a movement that everyone who feels the same can join.”

On March 15, McManus appeared on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's “7.30,” where she claimed to oppose the current draconian industrial relations laws and their far-reaching anti-strike provisions. “It shouldn't be so hard for workers in our country to be able to take industrial action when they need to,” she insisted, adding that the unions would be prepared to break the industrial relations laws. “I believe in the rule of law, when the law is right,” she said. “But when it's unjust, I don't think there's a problem with breaking it.”

These comments predictably triggered furious denunciations from Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal-National coalition government and the media, led by Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper. Liberal Defence Minister Christopher Pyne labelled her comments “anarcho-Marxist claptrap.”

Both McManus and her critics conveniently left out the most obvious fact about the current industrial laws: namely, that they were imposed by the former Labor government of Kevin Rudd, with the full support of the ACTU.

The Rudd government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation made it virtually impossible for workers to strike legally. The FWA regime incorporates, virtually unchanged, the main anti-strike provisions contained in the former Howard government's draconian “WorkChoices” laws, against which the unions campaigned during the 2007 federal election, under the banner of defending “your rights at work” (see: “Fair Work Australia: a union-imposed straitjacket on workers”).

Having supported and helped introduce FWA, the unions have

insisted that workers accept its terms. This has meant preventing their own members from striking in defiance of the legislation and forcing them to accept the dictates of the industrial courts—including attacks on jobs, wages and conditions—which the unions absurdly call the “independent umpire.”

The enforcement of such “legality” flows from the very nature of the trade unions. Unionism is not, and never has been, aimed at ending wage labour and exploitation, but at negotiating the terms of this exploitation within the framework of the capitalist private profit system. Over the past decades, under conditions of the globalisation of world economy and the drive for “international competitiveness,” i.e., the never-ending drive of employers everywhere to slash wages, jobs and conditions, the unions have become nothing but an industrial police-force for the employers and the state. Their role now is to guarantee to employers that the workers will abide by the courts' rulings, and to collaborate with the state against any workers who dare defy the law and insist on fighting for their rights.

If the leader of the ACTU now claims that aspects of the very FWA legislation that it imposed on the working class should be opposed, it is because the unions are fearful of the enormous anger that is building up among workers throughout the country. An onslaught of job destruction is underway, particularly in manufacturing, while a series of major employers—including the Loy Yang power station in Victoria's Latrobe Valley—have directly used the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the court which oversees the FWA laws, to carry through outright wage cuts.

A certain division of labour is involved. For example, McManus, dubbing herself a “unionist first, second and third,” has vowed to put pressure on “both parties” to commit to reversing a recent FWC decision to cut “penalty rates” (a higher wage) for employees who work on Sundays and public holidays. The Turnbull government, under intense pressure from business, has publicly backed the ruling. The opposition Labor Party, despite the fact that it initiated the four-year review into penalty rates in the first place, has decided, in order to revive its own collapsing support base, to oppose the court's decision.

Following the line of her counterparts in 2007, McManus intends to use this political charade to lead a campaign, over the next two years, that will channel workers' hostility to the assault on their conditions back behind the election of a Labor government. Opposition leader Bill Shorten responded to the media and government hysteria against McManus's comment by declaring that “we believe in changing bad laws, not breaking them” and that the answer was not defiance, but voting for Labor.

Since the age of 19, when she became student union president at

Sydney's Macquarie University, McManus has climbed her way up the rungs of the union apparatus. In 1994, she trained alongside Shorten as a union official in the ACTU's Organising Works program, under then-ACTU secretary Bill Kelty. She was later state secretary of the Australian Services Union in New South Wales from 2005 until 2015.

In an interview with the *Australian* newspaper last Friday, McManus revealed that she met with Kelty ahead of her appointment as ACTU secretary. She described him as a "master strategist and once-in-a-generation fighter in terms of his ability to organise a disparate movement."

McManus went on to repeat what Kelty had told her. "He said, 'look we were never popular when we achieved some of the really big things like Medicare and universal superannuation. It was not like the whole of the public was onside and always loved us. They didn't, but we had to think through and be smart about how we were going to achieve things and just be determined about doing it.'"

Kelty was ACTU secretary from 1983 to 2000. Under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments (1983–1996), he played a key role in imposing Labor's Price and Incomes Accords and its "enterprise bargaining" regime which were used to drive down workers' wages and conditions and destroy thousands of jobs. In 1996, after the Labor government suffered a landslide electoral defeat, particularly in working-class areas, Kelty worked overtime to shut down the political and industrial opposition that erupted to the budget cuts brought down by the newly elected Liberal-National government of John Howard. Upon his retirement, Kelty was hailed by the corporate elites and both sides of the political establishment for services rendered (see: "Australian trade union leader resigns").

McManus's identification with Kelty reveals infinitely more about her attitude to the working class than her empty rhetoric about defying "unfair" laws. Perhaps more than any other figure in trade union history, Kelty personifies the unions' transformation, from the 1980s onwards, in the era of globalisation. Under his leadership, workers were instructed to give up past gains in order to allow their employers to achieve "international competitiveness." Numerous strikes were sabotaged, union militants victimised and entire unions, such as the Builders' Labourers Federation, smashed—with the active support of the ACTU.

The result of the ACTU's open collaboration with the employers and government was a historic collapse in union membership, which fell nationally from approximately 48 percent in 1983, to barely 15 percent in 2015, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. By the 2000s, strike levels, likewise, had fallen to historic lows.

McManus has attempted to deny that the policies of the unions played any part in this process. She told the *Guardian Australia*: "The reason union membership has declined is due to the destruction of regular work, it's in decline all around the world. Steady, secure jobs are being contracted out, outsourced, people are put on rolling contracts or forced to get out—all things that have taken power away from workers and made it much harder to organise."

In fact, hundreds of thousands of workers were driven from full-time unionised jobs as a result of union-brokered "restructuring." Millions voted with their feet by leaving the unions, refusing to pay for the privilege of being lied to, sold out and betrayed by corrupt and indifferent bureaucracies.

With the collapse of dues-paying members, the union apparatus turned its attention to developing new forms of parasitism to shore up its income base. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, the

findings of the 2015 royal commission into trade union corruption, published in 2016, revealed that the unions have established medical and life insurance companies covering their own members from which they draw millions of dollars, as well as training companies and bogus charities and "not-for-profits," into which employers donate money. In many cases, companies paid the union the "membership dues" of workers who did not even know they were union members, in exchange for cuts to workers' conditions.

The trade unions are well aware that the majority of workers view them with distrust and disgust. In the final analysis, McManus has been installed in a desperate attempt to provide the ACTU apparatus with a face-lift. Her major remit is to, once again, promote the election of a Labor government, as a "lesser evil" to the conservative parties.

McManus has form in this regard. She served as director of the ACTU's "Save Medicare" campaign during the 2016 federal election. The campaign promoted illusions that Labor, if elected, would prevent the destruction of what is left of Medicare, the subsidised public health insurance scheme that has become nothing but a shadow of its former self. It did not take long for the fraud of McManus's campaign to be revealed. During the election, Labor leader Shorten quietly dropped any opposition to the Turnbull government's more than \$57 billion in cuts to hospital funding over the next decade.

Most tellingly, McManus has raised no objections to the ACTU's promotion of nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism through its campaigns against foreign workers entering Australia on temporary "457" visas. Nor has she differed with the peak union body's full support to the Labor Party's alignment with the United States in the military build-up against China in Asia and the return under the Coalition government of Australian military forces to the Middle East.

McManus's "left" rhetoric is so much hot air. Under the guise of a "progressive," "fighting" posture, she will continue with the reactionary nationalist, anti-working class program of her predecessors. The essential lesson that the working class must draw, after well over a century of experiences with the Labor Party and the trade unions, is the need for a complete and conscious political break from them all. At workplaces throughout the country, workers need to begin building rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, that will launch a genuine fight to defend jobs and conditions by seeking to unify with their counterparts in other workplaces and industries who face the same attacks.

Such a fight requires the development of an independent, socialist perspective, based on the fight for the international unity of the working class of all countries against the danger of war, the rise of unprecedented levels of social inequality and the ongoing assault on democratic rights. This entails the development of the struggle for a workers government and the socialist re-organisation of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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