

Australian pseudo-left promotes fraudulent posturing of new union head

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Australian pseudo-left organisations have responded to the appointment of Sally McManus last month as the new secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, with unalloyed enthusiasm.

In one of her first television interviews, McManus implied on the ABC's "7:30" program that she opposed the Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation which bans industrial action outside of strictly limited "bargaining" periods. She suggested that the ACTU would support workers going on strike in defiance of the law. Her comments were immediately presented by the pseudo-left organisations as proof of a revival of "union militancy."

Socialist Alliance, for example, wrote on March 18: "Many unionists are encouraged by McManus's fighting words" and claimed that they raised the prospect of "a strategic shift in the trade union movement in this country." Socialist Alternative declared on March 20: "Every militant in the union movement will welcome as a breath of fresh air Sally McManus's comments on defying unjust laws."

All of the pseudo-left groupings covered up the glaring hypocrisy of McManus's statements.

The union movement supported the introduction of FWA in 2009 by the Labor government of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and now Labor leader Bill Shorten, endorsing laws that made strikes illegal. Since then, the unions have routinely invoked the Labor-imposed ban on industrial action to suppress any struggle by workers. Strike activity is at historic lows, real wages have fallen, and ever-growing numbers of workers have been pushed into contract, casual or part-time employment.

The disgust in the working class with the unions, combined with the destruction of full-time, unionised jobs, has seen union membership fall to a record low of just 15 percent in 2015, and barely 11 percent of the private sector workforce.

Under McManus, the unions are initiating a cynical and transparent attempt to try and rebuild their credentials and their membership. In comments to the *Guardian* on March 15, she revealed that her rhetoric was motivated by the concerns in the union apparatus over its lack of influence over millions of workers—especially non-unionised workers—under conditions of mounting anger over social inequality. McManus stated: "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."

The ACTU has indicated that it intends to conduct a multi-million dollar recruitment campaign over the coming years, modelled on the "Your Rights at Work" campaign in 2006–2007 against the WorkChoices industrial legislation enacted by the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister John Howard.

One of the main objectives of "Your Rights at Work" was to convince alienated and disaffected workers to vote for the Labor Party in the 2007 federal election on the basis it would repeal WorkChoices. Once Labor was elected, the unions proceeded to collaborate with the introduction of the FWA regime, which incorporated many of the most draconian aspects of Howard's legislation.

The pseudo-left organisations have stepped forward again as the cheerleaders for the ACTU's latest political deception led by McManus, which is also aimed at assisting the return of Labor at the next election.

Socialist Alternative, for instance, lauded union rallies last month against a FWA court ruling that cut penalty rates on Sundays and holidays for some 700,000 workers who are employed on national awards rather than union-negotiated "enterprise" agreements. Its only qualification was that the unions "must aim for more this time than the installation of a Labor government at the next election."

The organisation Solidarity declared, in response to the penalty rate cut, that the unions should call "national mass stop-work protests like those held during the Your Rights at Work campaign against John Howard's WorkChoices."

The Socialist Party went even further and called for the ACTU to call a one-day "national general strike." It asserted that such a strike would "send a strong message to employers, and the parliament."

Even if the unions did call "days of action," or even token general strikes, as they have done in countries such as Greece, they would be intended only to dissipate workers' anger—to "let off steam"—over the conditions they face. The unions would undoubtedly give Labor and Green politicians a platform to once again fraudulently present themselves as a "lesser evil" to the Liberal government.

In order to promote the lie that the unions can be vehicles for advancing the interests of the working class, the pseudo-left organisations do everything they can to cover-up their record.

A glaring example was a brief article in Socialist Alliance's *Green Left Weekly* in February, which hailed a deal between the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Japanese energy multinational Impex. Under this sordid agreement, the company has agreed to preference "Australian workers" for seafaring jobs servicing its \$34 billion LNG project in Northern Australia.

The nationalist demand of the unions for the protection of "Aussie jobs" is a deliberate effort to divide workers internationally who work for the same transnational corporation and who need to unify to conduct any genuine struggle for their interests. In exchange for Impex agreeing to the union's demand, the MUA has made the unprecedented commitment that there will be no industrial action against the company *until 2030*.

In most of Socialist Alliance's commentary on the FWC cut to penalty rates, it has not raised the obvious issue that union-company "enterprise" agreements have already abolished or cut weekend and public holiday wages for hundreds of thousands of workers, especially in the large retail and fast-food chains.

Socialist Alternative, for its part, repeatedly tries to draw a distinction between "conservative" unions, such as the retail union that signed away its members' penalty rates, and those that it claims are "militant" such as the MUA and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).

To prevent reality intruding on its assertions, Socialist Alternative is silent on the wretched deals these unions negotiate with major employers. As well as ignoring the MUA-Impex agreement, it has also written nothing on the CFMEU's imposition of a five percent pay cut affecting up to 900 workers at the Maryvale paper mill in Victoria in February.

Nor has it commented on the revelations of close ties between the CFMEU and property developers linked to "phoenix operations" which have stripped workers of millions of dollars in entitlements, or the union's establishment of phony "charities" which receive substantial donations from the major corporations.

The pseudo-left groupings are above all preoccupied with denying the pro-capitalist essence of the trade unions. Unionism, from its origins, was based on the acceptance of the private ownership of the means of production, and the wage labour system that is the basis of the exploitation of the working class under capitalism. Even at its most "militant," unionism always sought to limit workers to the framework of the capitalist order by holding out the prospect that strikes and other industrial action could compel employers and governments to grant concessions such as higher wages, conditions and social advances.

The pseudo-left claims that the unions can be returned to the limited "militancy" of the past denies the impact of the

globalisation of production since the 1970s. The development of transnational companies, which utilise global finance, production chains, transport and communications, and can rapidly shift operations between and within countries, shattered the ability of unions to pressure the capitalist class within the framework of the national-state.

To try to keep corporations operating in "their" national economy, the trade unions in every part of the world have transformed into industrial police forces. For over 30 years, unions have continuously pressured workers to give up their past gains to satisfy corporate demands for international competitiveness and profitability. In Australia, the unions have emerged as major corporate investors and operators in their own right, exercising control over multi-billion dollar superannuation (retirement) funds and even managing labour-hire companies that exploit their own members.

The defence of trade unions by the pseudo-left flows from the material interests of an affluent, generally pro-Labor or pro-Green layer of the middle class, in the upper echelons of the public sector, academia, the media and the unions. While the conditions of the working class have plummeted, this layer has benefited from rising stock and real estate prices and the ever-greater concentration of income and wealth in the hands of the top 10 percent of the population. Members of the pseudo-left groupings now hold senior and well-paid union positions.

The politics of the pseudo-left do not represent the interests of the working class in any sense. The class role of such organisations is to try and oppose the necessary break that workers must make with the pro-capitalist political and union apparatus and the development of a mass socialist and internationalist movement, fighting for a workers' government and socialist policies.



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