

Australian unions, pseudo-left sign up to Labor's re-election campaign

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A Unions New South Wales delegates' meeting last week provided a graphic example of how the unions and their allies in the various pseudo-left organisations are seeking to channel widespread anger over social inequality, declining wages and the gutting of social spending, into the re-election of a federal Labor government.

Speaking at the meeting on July 28, Sally McManus, secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), referenced the mounting social crisis facing working people. She noted that inequality in Australia is at its "worst level in 70 years," with the richest 1 percent of the population controlling more wealth than the poorest 70 percent.

McManus added: "Since the global economic crisis nearly all wealth has gone to the top." She listed the abolition of weekend penalty wages and draconian industrial laws as examples of the fact that "workers' rights are no longer strong enough." McManus has previously described herself as a "democratic socialist."

McManus' posture is shot through with hypocrisy. What she was presenting is a short-list of the consequences of the collaboration of the unions with successive governments, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, and the major corporations.

It was the ACTU that signed a series of accords with Labor governments and big business in the 1980s, which provided for the deregulation of the economy. This led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs.

The unions, working with the Labor Party, also spearheaded the introduction of "enterprise bargaining" in the early 1990s. For more than 20 years, union bureaucrats have signed off on pro-business enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) that have lowered wages and eroded working conditions, including the elimination of penalty rates for cleaners, fast food workers and other

low-paid employees.

The anti-strike laws referenced by McManus are contained in Fair Work Australia legislation, introduced by the last federal Labor government with the full support of the unions.

Underlying the ACTU's bogus campaign is the fear within the political establishment that the unprecedented disaffection fuelled by the mounting social crisis threatens the stability, and the very existence, of the two-party parliamentary set-up. This is why Labor leader, Bill Shorten, who heads one of the main big business parties, has also begun mentioning inequality and suggesting corporate and family trust tax hikes.

McManus called for rallies next year, when a federal election could be held, and proposed to "place demands on Labor and the Greens." Her left demagoguery is aimed at ensuring the election of a Labor or a Labor-Greens government that would impose the austerity demands of the corporate elite—as they have done in the past.

Other speakers struck a similar note. Brian Parker, the state secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, outlined his union's bogus campaign against the federal Coalition government's building code. He was silent on the fact that many of the code's draconian provisions, including those banning strikes, were contained in the previous Labor government's legislation, supported by his union.

Parker touted a worthless Senate inquiry, called by the Labor Party, into the building code, as a means of addressing the issue. He said the union also was lobbying right-wing crossbench senators, including Derryn Hinch and Pauline Hanson, a notorious xenophobe.

Paul McAleer, head of the Sydney branch of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, said it was necessary to "fight the ruling class on the streets." For all of McAleer's bluster, the MUA has again and again

suppressed any independent struggle by the working class and struck its own treacherous deals with employers.

McAlear recalled Labor's record in imposing Fair Work laws, but claimed workers had to support that party, because it had "the capacity to form government."

Annette Bennett of the TAFE Teachers Association conceded Labor's role in enforcing funding cuts to public vocational training, which saw the closure of dozens of TAFE colleges, and the sacking of thousands of teachers.

However, Bennett declared: "After years of Labor obsessing about creating a market in education, we've won the fight and convinced them it's not working."

To justify this lie, Bennett cited federal Labor electoral promises that two-thirds of vocational education funding would go to public institutions. Even in the improbable event that this promise is kept, a third will continue to go to private colleges that charge exorbitant fees, while receiving handsome government payouts. For the unions, this pro-business agenda constitutes a "victory."

After the officials spoke, handpicked delegates addressed the meeting from the floor. CFMEU representatives demagogically declared they were "ready for a fight" and moved a resolution to hold a protest in October.

Members of the pseudo-left tendencies bolstered the posturing of the unions, and backed their promotion of Labor.

Robin Mayo, a Socialist Alliance member, spoke as a Finance Services Union delegate. He said Labor's proposal for a Royal Commission into the banking sector was "so necessary," because of the financial institutions' predatory operations.

After hailing Labor's cynical manoeuvre, Mayo said it would, at some point, be necessary to "nationalise the banks." His comment summed up the tenor of the meeting—support for the status quo, and the major parties, justified with fake-left rhetoric.

The CFMEU's Parker, a prominent supporter of the Labor Party, made a point of thanking Mayo for his comments.

Erima Dall, a Solidarity member who was, until recently, a long-time "student activist," declared she was now an MUA representative. Dall called for an endless series of protests. She urged the unions to replicate their "Your rights at work" campaign in 2006-07, which was used to channel hostility to the Howard Liberal-National government into the election of a Labor government, which imposed no less draconian industrial legislation.

This is precisely what the unions are seeking to do

again. The final speaker at the meeting was Brendan O'Connor, Labor's shadow minister for workplace relations. He repeatedly stated that while there were "shortcomings" to previous Labor governments, Bill Shorten had "policies to tackle inequality." He did not outline any such policies, except to claim that Labor opposed the government's construction laws.

O'Connor defended Fair Work Australia, noting that Labor and the unions always had been committed to arbitration mechanisms between the unions and big business. These mechanisms aim to suppress the class struggle.

O'Connor was a minister in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013 as they carried out sweeping pro-business cuts to healthcare, education and welfare, and oversaw the destruction of large sections of industry. His presence makes clear that the unions are seeking to divert discontent behind another Labor government that would be no less committed to the dictates of the corporate elite.

In its report on the meeting, Solidarity failed to mention that O'Connor was the keynote speaker. Instead, it called for the Turnbull government to be "booted out when the election comes," and appealed to the unions to "keep the pressure on the Labor Party to reverse the attacks on workers if they get elected."

Socialist Alliance falsely claimed that O'Connor "received a grilling from a number of unionists." In reality, the union officials presented as "militants" by Socialist Alliance, including CFMEU leaders such as Parker, warmly welcomed O'Connor to the stage. Socialist Alliance's own members at the meeting were no less fawning, with decades-long leader, Jim McIlroy politely applauding O'Connor's lies.

The meeting was a sharp warning of the political mechanisms that will increasingly be used to suppress the working class, as it enters into convulsive struggles for its social and democratic rights.



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