

Australian Labor leader sounds alarm about popular hostility to political establishment

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In a speech intended to “start the political year,” Labor Party leader Bill Shorten has revealed the fears wracking the entire ruling class of the mounting scorn and alienation felt among millions of people toward the parliament and other official institutions.

Shorten, a long-time trade union bureaucrat and former Labor government minister, was installed as Labor’s leader after its heavy defeat in the 2013 election. Addressing the National Press Club on Tuesday, he set out what he regards as the priority “missions” for the parliamentary elite during 2018.

The speech was given against a backdrop of ever-more glaring social inequality, declining working and living conditions, growing concerns about the dangers of war, and indications that the pent-up anger in the working class could erupt in major industrial battles, such as those already threatened in the New South Wales rail and electricity networks.

Globally, similar political and class tensions are reaching boiling point, triggering protests and strikes in many countries, including Germany, Greece, Romania, Tunisia, Iran and the United States.

Shorten’s address amounted to a plea for a bipartisan front with the Liberal-National Coalition government to try to corral the discontent in Australia back into the parliamentary framework, while appealing for the return of a trade union-backed Labor government as the best means of containing the unrest.

This year could see an early federal election called, because of the unpopularity and infighting afflicting the Coalition. It has barely survived with a one-seat majority in the parliamentary lower house after its near defeat in the July 2016 double dissolution election.

First and foremost, Shorten stated, the task was “restoring faith in parliament.” He declared: “This question is far bigger than [Prime Minister] Malcolm

[Turnbull] vs me, or Liberal vs Labor—this is about restoring confidence in our democratic system and our public institutions. We should treat this mission as seriously as we take national security.”

In other words, the very “security” of the financial and corporate elite depends on reversing the widespread disgust felt toward the ruling establishment. This has been the Labor Party’s chief “mission” for a century—diverting all social and class struggles into the dead-end of the official political setup, in which well-rewarded politicians do the bidding of the transnational corporations and billionaires.

Shorten spoke about the “corrosive sentiment awash in Western democracies around the world,” blaming “the idea that politicians are only in it for themselves.” His only proposal was the creation of a “National Integrity Commission” modeled on the existing anti-corruption bodies at the state government level. How this would “restore trust” he did not explain.

The Labor leader then turned to his second “mission”—to demonstrate that the parliamentary system has “the capacity to make the economy work for working Australians.” He warned about “all those people who feel like they’re being left behind.”

In a cynical bid to appease the disaffection, Shorten listed a litany of its causes—including company profits and CEO salaries surging alongside household bills going “through the roof,” low wages, cuts to weekend penalty rate pay, “massive increases in the cost of health care,” electricity prices rising nearly six times wages growth and house prices increasing four times faster than wages.

Shorten provided no explanation for this social polarisation—because it lies in the capitalist profit system itself—and offered no solutions. He cautiously suggested lifting minimum wage rates, on which he

said 2.3 million Australians now depend, to “a real, living wage.” To reassure big business, he immediately added: “Of course, we have to be mindful of the capacity of industry to pay.”

Far from being concerned about low-paid workers, Shorten’s main argument was that slightly higher wages would encourage “hard work” and boost profits. It would “rebuild the idea that a fairly paid workforce is a more productive workforce in a more profitable business.”

What this actually means can be seen from the Labor leader’s own role over decades, first as a leader of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), one of the country’s biggest trade unions. He cultivated intimate ties with big business, while enforcing mass layoffs, productivity speedups and wage-cutting drives.

Shorten’s complaints about the elimination of penalty rates are utterly hypocritical. Under his leadership, the AWU pioneered the imposition of flat-rate wages on some of the country’s lowest-paid workers, such as Cleanevent casual cleaners, saving companies millions of dollars.

Shorten’s other main plea was for the resuscitation of enterprise bargaining as a “driver of productivity.” Both as a senior union official and later as workplace relations minister in the last Labor government, he was a key figure in the enforcement of enterprise bargaining, a regime introduced by the Keating Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in the 1990s to isolate workers, employer by employer, and tie them directly to the speedup and profit demands of their individual companies.

Under the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, the unions suppressed all resistance in the working class to the “free market” offensive that saw unprecedented social inequality through the transfer of wealth to the top of society.

After being rewarded with a parliamentary seat in 2007, Shorten further promoted the interests of business. He backed the Labor government’s Fair Work industrial legislation, which reinforced the unions’ function in policing the enterprise bargaining system, outlaws most industrial action and also permits governments and employers to lock out workers and ban strikes.

During 2011 and 2012, as the Gillard government’s

workplace relations minister, Shorten worked with employers to use the Fair Work laws to stop strikes by workers at Qantas and P&O ports, other sections of waterfront workers, Victorian nurses and manufacturing workers, paving the way for the destruction of thousands of jobs.

In the final portion of his speech, Shorten tried to cover as many other issues causing disenchantment as possible. Among his nominated “generational challenges” were climate change, the severe bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef and the Coalition government’s payment of billion-dollar subsidies to coal mining companies. It was a transparent bid to garner votes to shore up Labor’s own poor opinion poll ratings and the likelihood that it will lose some inner-city seats to the Greens.

Glaring in its absence from Shorten’s speech was any reference to the extreme geo-political tensions across the Indo-Pacific region and globally generated by the accelerating US military build-up against its now openly designated major targets, China and Russia, as well as North Korea and Iran.

In 2010, Shorten was one of the Labor Party and union powerbrokers, later exposed by WikiLeaks as “protected sources” of the US embassy, who orchestrated the inner-party coup that ousted Kevin Rudd as prime minister and installed Julia Gillard. Rudd had earned Washington’s wrath by calling on the US to accommodate to China’s growth. Shorten backed Gillard as she enlisted in President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia” and integrated Australia into the Pentagon’s war plans.

Tuesday’s speech gave a sample of the hypocrisy, lies and cover-up to expect this year. With his phony expressions of concern for people “doing it tough” and being “left behind,” Shorten is making a pitch for the return of another pro-business and pro-US Labor government to try to head off a brewing social and political eruption, and prepare the population for war.



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