

Australian Labor Party president warns of collapsing membership

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In two recent speeches, Mark Butler, the Australian Labor Party's national president, presented a devastating portrait of the accelerating disintegration of membership and support for both the Labor Party and the trade unions.

Butler's remarks point to a growing fear in ruling circles of the deepening hostility in the working class toward these twin institutions, which have been central to subordinating workers to the profit system since the 1890s, particularly during periods of crisis—two world wars and the 1930s Great Depression.

Over the past four decades, Labor governments and the unions have systematically suppressed workers' struggles, as they presided over the greatest-ever transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial elite. From apparatuses that propped up Australian capitalism by gaining limited concessions, in terms of wages and conditions, they have become industrial policemen for tearing apart jobs, wages and conditions to satisfy the dictates of globally-mobile finance capital.

Addressing the Victorian Fabian Society on January 22, Butler said the party's membership of 50,000 had “disturbingly” declined by more than 6 percent since a peak in 2015. In a country of 25 million people, it could not “credibly claim to be a mass-membership party.”

Butler emphasised that Labor's primary vote in the 2016 federal election was less than 35 percent, only 1.3 points higher than the record low of 2013, when the last Labor government was defeated in a landslide. The party's Senate vote was “even worse”—it dropped below 30 percent for the first time since 1903.

In a second speech, delivered to the Australian Institute on February 2, Butler noted that after a collapse in union numbers in the 1990s, the membership had dived again over the past five years. It had reached “a threshold we regarded years ago as existentially threatening”—under 10 percent of the private sector workforce. For workers aged under 25, the rate was just 5 percent.

Butler recalled that when he first became a union official in 1992, membership was still running at about 40 percent of the workforce, having dropped from levels exceeding 50 percent in the mid-1970s.

As a long-time factional powerbroker, Butler epitomises these organisations. He was installed as party president in 2015 as the Labor “Left” faction's candidate. Currently Labor's shadow minister for climate change and energy, he has been a member of Labor's central decision-making body, the national executive, since 2000.

Before being hoisted into parliament in 2007, in the working-class electorate of Port Adelaide, he was a union bureaucrat for 15 years—from the age of 22. For more than a decade, from 1996 to 2007, he was the South Australian state secretary of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, which was rebadged in 2011 as United Voice. For his services, Butler was quickly promoted. Between 2009 and 2013, he was appointed a highly-paid parliamentary secretary, then a minister in the last Labor government.

Butler is the second Labor politician to sound the alarm this year. At the end of January, federal parliamentary Labor leader Bill Shorten warned of the mounting scorn felt among millions of people toward the major parties and the parliament as a whole. Shorten called for a bipartisan “mission” with the ruling Liberal-National Coalition to “restore faith in parliament.”

What Shorten and Butler could not mention is why support for Labor and the unions has haemorrhaged so dramatically. That is because they are committed to intensifying the pro-business policies that have led to the implosion.

In his Fabian Society speech, Butler warned: “Respect for the major parties is running at historically low levels.” But he denied this was “a lack of respect for our ideas and our policies.” On the contrary, he lauded “the power of Labor's ideas,” claiming: “Labor holds a unique position

in Australian society as the principal protector of a fair go for all.”

In reality, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s, working closely with the trade unions, began the restructuring of Australian capitalism to make it “internationally competitive” at the direct expense of the working class. Through prices and incomes Accords and “Australian Reconstructed” partnerships with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the Labor and union leaders suppressed workers’ resistance to the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs, the imposition of casualisation and privatisation, the driving down of wages and the tearing up of hard-won rights and conditions.

From 1992, the Keating government and the ACTU deepened this offensive via the imposition of “enterprise bargaining,” which atomised workers into individual workplaces, tied their jobs and conditions to the profits of their separate employers, and outlawed all industrial action outside narrow “bargaining periods.”

The Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013, again working with the unions, took this assault to new levels, including by enforcing the destruction of thousands more jobs in basic industries, and imposing market-driven regimes in education, health and disability services.

Butler told the Fabians that the problem was Labor’s lack of organisational “reform,” which left it in the grips of “self-appointed factional warlords.” He declared he would fight for changes at Labor’s next national conference in July. His main proposal was to try to mimic the British Labour Party by creating a new category of “registered supporter,” giving some voting rights to individuals who did not want to become full members.

Butler assured his audience this could be achieved without adopting British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s “hard-Left” agenda, because the ALP’s “Moderate voice” was better organised than their British equivalents. The truth is that Corbyn’s “left” leadership, which continually prostrates itself to the openly right-wing acolytes of Tony Blair, represents a desperate effort to head-off a leftward movement of workers and youth.

Butler made similar pledges to “democratise” the party when running for party president in 2015. He echoed promises from Shorten, who said in 2014, “we must rebuild as a membership-based party” and declared his ambition to have 100,000 members. Far from democratising this hollowed-out organisation, such changes only seek to free the parliamentary leadership

from the influence of factional and sectional interests to make it more malleable for the business elite.

Likewise, Butler’s “solution” to the demise of the unions is to introduce a Californian-style “bargaining fee.” This would compel non-union members to pay, via the enterprise bargaining system, for “enjoying the benefits of union-negotiated wages and conditions.” He also suggested adopting German-style Works Councils, which would make the unions full partners in the companies whose workers they police.

Butler’s “bargaining fee” plan would mean trying to dragoon all workers, especially the young workers who see no “benefit” from joining these corporatised organisations, into financing apparatuses that are working continually against their interests.

The central pillar of Butler’s speech to the Australian Institute was to shore up enterprise bargaining, for the benefit of Australian capitalism. He hailed the 1990s shift to enterprise bargaining as “heavily driven by a desire to lift productivity in manufacturing workplaces after the dramatic industry restructuring exercises of the 1980s and in the face of growing global competition.” It was, he said, “a clever policy response which has served large parts of our economy very well.”

Butler’s two speeches were given against a backdrop of ever-more glaring social inequality, deteriorating 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. His remarks are warning of the preparations underway to refashion the Labor Party and unions as the key mechanism to combat the unrest.



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