

Australian unions launch campaign to re-elect an anti-working class Labor government

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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the national union umbrella federation, is conducting a multi-million dollar campaign entitled “Change the Rules.” The operation—which includes a blitz of television and social media advertising, and limited protests over the coming weeks—is a desperate attempt to channel mounting disaffection over social inequality, the rising cost of living and record-low wage growth behind the election of another pro-business federal Labor government.

Launching the campaign in a National Press Club address last month, ACTU secretary Sally McManus cynically invoked the deepening social crisis, for which the trade unions are responsible due to their collaboration with the successive governments and the corporate elite.

McManus denounced the extent of social inequality, which she observed was at a 70-year high. She reviewed the growing prevalence of casual and precarious employment, falling wages, the rising cost of living and increasing poverty.

McManus’ address included populist denunciations of big business and the Liberal-National Coalition government headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. “The billionaire class is not going to limit its greed,” she declared. “It needs limits imposed, and it is us, the people of Australia, who must do this.”

McManus pointed to mounting opposition in the working class, saying: “This crisis is making Australian workers angry. Angry at the indifference of the Turnbull government, which instructs us to wait patiently for the trickle-down to happen. Angry at CEOs whose pay and bonuses soar while families struggle to pay the bills.”

McManus and the ACTU know, however, that anger among workers is directed not only against the

Coalition, but also at the trade unions and the Labor Party. Both are discredited bureaucratic shells, which function as the open instruments of the corporate elite.

Union membership has fallen to record lows, barely 10 percent across the private sector. Among young workers, the figure is less than 5 percent. Labor Party national president Mark Butler stated earlier this year that the unions had reached “a threshold we regarded years ago as existentially threatening,” while the Labor Party could not “credibly claim to be a mass-membership party.”

Under these conditions, Labor and the unions are terrified that they will be unable to suppress the emerging social and political struggles of the working class. They have followed closely the wave of strikes among American teachers, British lecturers, and other sections of workers around the world, which have developed as a rebellion against the thoroughly corporatised trade unions.

Already, a series of disputes in Australia, including those involving New South Wales rail staff this year and Victorian teachers last year, have led to near-rebellions by workers against union-brokered sell-out agreements.

Over the past year, McManus has attended a host of picket lines and protests, trying to head off an open confrontation between workers and the unions. In each instance, she has deployed fake-militant rhetoric to buttress the attempts by ACTU affiliates to isolate striking and locked-out workers, and help impose regressive enterprise agreements that slash wages and conditions and destroy jobs.

Addressing a union delegates meeting in Melbourne on April 17 to begin the campaign, McManus sought to present the unions as leading an offensive against “trickle-down economics” and “neoliberalism.”

McManus made clear, however, that the real aim of “Change the Rules” is to subordinate workers to the re-election of a Labor government. “We need to change the government, we need to kick out Malcolm Turnbull,” she declared, adding it was critical that the campaign secure Labor’s support.

McManus invoked the “Your Rights At Work” campaign waged by the unions in 2006–07 as a model to be emulated. That operation, which included the union suppression of strike activity to its lowest level in history, was aimed at channelling widespread hostility to the draconian “Work Choices” industrial legislation of the Howard Liberal-National government behind the election of a Labor government headed by Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

McManus’ comments underscored the fraud at the centre of the union campaign. She said Labor had introduced the Fair Work Act to “rebuild things” and improve industrial relations. She claimed that Liberal-National governments had “misused” the legislation.

In reality, Labor’s Fair Work laws incorporated large aspects of Work Choices and enshrined some of the harshest anti-strike legislation in the world, while deliberately reinforcing the role of the unions to police these “rules.” The Fair Work Act has been enforced exactly as Labor and the unions intended: to make illegal virtually all industrial action; victimise workers who take up an industrial or political struggle; and impose ongoing pro-business restructuring in every industry.

The enforcement of the Fair Work “rules” is the continuation of decades of collaboration between the unions, successive governments and big business to achieve “international competitiveness” for Australian capitalism.

During the 1980s, the ACTU signed a series of Accords with the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and the major corporations. These provided for the deregulation of the economy, the shutting down of shop stewards’ committees and other forms of workers’ organisation and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs across manufacturing and other industries.

In the 1990s, the ACTU backed the Keating Labor government’s introduction of enterprise bargaining, which divided workers, employer by employer, and tied them directly to the speedup and profit demands of

their individual companies.

Since then, unions across the board have signed agreements mandating real wage cuts, the elimination of penalty wage rates, and the destruction of long-standing working conditions. This has led to an unprecedented growth of part-time, casual and contract labour, record low wage growth and growing poverty. The unions are directly responsible for the social crisis that the ACTU campaign purports to oppose.

The record makes clear that the unions are not workers’ organisations. They function as labour hire firms and an industrial police force. They do the bidding of the financial elite and governments against the workers they falsely claim to represent, in the interests of a privileged, upper middle-class union officialdom.

Workers face the necessity of making a complete break with the unions, and the fraudulent claim that their interests can be advanced through the election of yet another Labor government that would work hand in glove with the unions to impose the dictates of the corporate elite.

New organisations of struggle are required in every workplace, including rank-and-file committees under workers’ democratic control and completely independent of the trade unions. These would be tasked with coordinating a joint political and industrial counter-offensive against the attacks imposed by the government, the corporations and the unions.

Above all, the struggles of the working class must be guided by a political perspective that rejects the corporatism and nationalism of the unions. This means the fight for a workers’ government committed to socialist and internationalist policies, including placing the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control and a far-reaching redistribution of wealth.



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