

Australian unions promote Labor Party at “Change the Rules” rally in Melbourne

Our reporters
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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the national union umbrella federation, and Victorian Trades Hall organised a demonstration in Melbourne on Wednesday to bolster their “Change the Rules” campaign. Like rallies held in other capital and regional cities, the Melbourne protest was aimed at channelling growing discontent behind the re-election of a big business federal Labor government.

Stopworks were called by some unions at workplaces across the state. Between 60,000 and 100,000 workers, according to different estimates, marched from Trades Hall to Federation Square in central Melbourne. The large attendance reflected mounting social opposition within the working class, and a broad desire to fight back against the decades-long assault on jobs, wages, conditions and social spending.

Delegations participated from different parts of Melbourne and regional Victoria, with large contingents from the unions that nominally represent construction and manufacturing workers, electricians, dockworkers, hospital and health workers, teachers, academics and public servants.

These unions—together responsible for innumerable betrayals in the working class—are now posturing as opponents of social inequality and corporate exploitation. A multi-million dollar “Change the Rules” campaign, including prominent television and radio advertisements, is ostensibly aimed at opposing casual and precarious employment, declining real wages, rising costs of living and poverty.

The real agenda, however, is two-fold. Firstly, the unions are seeking the installation of a Labor government in the upcoming federal election, which may be called within months. Secondly, they want Labor to adjust Australia’s industrial laws to entrench the privileges of the upper middle class union

bureaucracy, while working people endure ever-greater hardship.

The first speaker at the demonstration, Victorian Trades Hall Secretary Luke Hilakari, boasted that “Change the Rules” would “be a bigger campaign than WorkChoices” in 2007.

Eleven years ago, the union bureaucracy directed bitter hostility toward the Liberal-National government of John Howard, and its regressive WorkChoices industrial laws, behind the election campaign of then Labor leader Kevin Rudd. After the election, the Labor Party and the unions legislated the Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial regime, which maintained the prohibition on the right to strike and enforced a series of draconian, anti-democratic restrictions on any industrial action by workers.

As a consequence of the FWA legislation, which the unions endorsed, strikes and other forms of working class industrial action have declined to unprecedented lows, while corporate profitability and the accumulation of wealth by the rich has increased to new heights.

The unions are hoping for collective political amnesia within the working class.

Hilakari made a series of chant and response slogans. He asked: “Do you want to smash the rules? Do you want to take back our penalty rates? Do you want big business to pay their tax? Do you think Australia needs a pay rise? Do you want to get rid of [Prime Minister] Malcolm Turnbull?”

Responding to the “yes” call to the last question, Hilakari replied: “Well, so do we comrades.” He then declared that the union’s “plan” was to “mobilise and educate the working class.”

Such is the degree of hostility to the Labor Party within the working class that Hilakari did not feel able

to openly call for a vote for Labor.

This was nevertheless the guiding perspective of the entire rally. Susie Allison, assistant Victorian secretary of the National Union of Workers, followed Hilakari by declaring: “We’re going to change the rules and we’re going to change the government.”

ACTU secretary Sally McManus later addressed the rally and declared that the unions’ campaign was “about changing the rules of neo-liberalism, trickle-down economics.” She immediately let slip the real aim, however, with an angry complaint that the current Liberal-National government’s agenda meant that, “there’s only one group of people that should make all the decisions—the employers, the very rich, the very powerful—and because of that they’ve got to get us, the trade union movement, out of the way.”

Translated into plain English, this makes clear that so long as the ruling elite ceases and desists from occasional efforts to sideline the union bureaucracy, it will not pose any obstacle to the ongoing corporate drive for higher workplace productivity and lower wages.

McManus pointedly referred to the unions having to defend workers’ rights over the past 20 years, limiting the purported struggle to the period after the Liberal-National Coalition took office in 1996. Unmentioned throughout the protest was the devastating record of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, which held power from 1983 to 1996. With the complete collaboration of the unions, they imposed the same devastation to workers’ jobs, wages and conditions that was inflicted in the US and Britain by Republican and Conservative governments respectively.

All of the pseudo-left organisations have enthusiastically embraced the “Change the Rules” campaign. Socialist Alternative’s Mick Armstrong wrote that the event showed that “our unions” are “far from dead.” He described the union appeal to change the government as “fair enough.”

Armstrong cautioned only that “we can’t give Labor a blank cheque [and] we need to make it clear that the campaign won’t end on election day.” This statement underscores the backing of the pseudo-left for a big business Labor government that will intensify the assault on the social rights of the working class.

The sole organisation seeking to mobilise the working class on the socialist and internationalist

program that genuinely advances its interests is the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Workers seeking to build a genuine alternative to the Labor-Liberal offensive against their wages and conditions should contact the SEP through the *World Socialist Web Site*.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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