

Australian pseudo-left backs union campaign to elect a big business Labor government

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With Australia's Liberal-National government in turmoil, the pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative is supporting an Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) campaign for the election of yet another anti-working class Labor-led government.

The ACTU's "Change the Rules" advertising blitz is an attempt to channel mounting anger and political disaffection among workers behind the corporatised unions and the widely-reviled Labor Party. The unions are making limited criticisms of inequality, poverty and the assault on workers' conditions to deflect attention from their own central responsibility for the social crisis, and prevent independent social and political struggles by the working class.

Socialist Alternative is well aware of this. On March 23, Tom Bramble, a leader of the organisation, wrote that the campaign "involves throwing the resources of the union movement into a marginal seats campaign to toss out an incumbent Coalition government" and re-elect Labor.

Bramble said it was a "repeat" of the unions' "Your Rights at Work" initiative of 2006-2007, which channelled widespread hostility to the Liberal-National government of John Howard behind the election of a Kevin Rudd-led Labor government. That campaign, Bramble stated, "did nothing to halt the employer attacks at that time."

Bramble's article was an attempt at political damage control. He noted that since Sally McManus' installation as ACTU secretary early last year, workers had suffered defeats in industrial disputes across the country. In virtually every instance cited by Bramble, McManus attended picket lines or protests and dispensed populist demagoguery, while isolating striking or locked-out workers, and then collaborated with the companies involved to enforce cuts to wages and conditions.

Bramble did not mention the fact that in all these disputes, Socialist Alternative was a cheerleader for the

union bureaucracy. It promoted McManus' empty rhetoric, touted union claims to be leading a "struggle" and then apologised for, or remained completely silent on, the betrayal that followed.

On April 8, Jerome Small, another Socialist Alternative leader, dispensed with Bramble's attempts to distance the group from the calls for a Labor government. He declared the ACTU campaign was a "welcome attempt by Australia's union movement to put corporate power and anti-worker industrial laws at the centre of political debate in the lead-up to the federal election."

Last week, in response to a rally of workers in Melbourne, called by the ACTU, another Socialist Alternative leader, Mick Armstrong, backed speakers who called for a Labor government. He cited Susie Allison, Victorian assistant secretary of the National Workers Union, who stated: "We are going to change the government." Armstrong wrote: "Fair enough."

On May 6, Bramble dropped his previous pretensions to oppose an effort to install Labor. "What should we demand from the ALP to justify unions throwing their weight behind an electoral campaign?" he wrote. Bramble advocated a "log of claims," i.e., a set of demands, in exchange for backing Labor.

The fraudulent premise of this proposal is that "mass pressure," in the form of limited protests, and bogus promises from Labor members of parliament, will result in "reforms." Issuing demands "would serve as a good test of whether Labor has any intention of improving workers' lives."

Decades of experiences, however, have long demonstrated that the pledges of big business politicians during an election campaign are not worth the paper they are written on.

In his budget reply speech last week, Labor leader Bill Shorten bewailed inequality and corporate tax cuts, but made no commitments to boost social spending after

decades of cuts by Labor and Liberal-National governments. Instead, he signalled to the financial elite that Labor would impose further austerity to slash public debt and reduce the budget deficit.

Above all, Bramble is attempting to cover up the fact that over the past 35 years, Labor and the unions have taken their nationalist and pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion and become the central political instruments of the corporate elite's assault on workers. They dispensed with their limited program of national reforms, which was rendered bankrupt by the globalisation of production, and became the chief proponents of ensuring the "international competitiveness" of Australian capitalism through the continuous reduction of workers' wages and conditions.

From 1983, the Hawke Labor government and the ACTU struck "Accords" with the corporate elite that deregulated the economy, destroying hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs, and slashed corporate tax rates, beginning a massive transfer of wealth into the hands of the financial elite.

During the 1990s, Labor and the ACTU imposed enterprise bargaining. This split the working class into individual workplaces, blocked most industrial action and subordinated workers to the profit demands of "their" employers. For three decades, the unions have signed countless workplace agreements, driving down real wages, cutting conditions and enforcing mass redundancies.

After the 2007 elections, the unions backed the Rudd government's Fair Work Australia legislation that outlawed virtually all strike activity, punished workers who took industrial or political action and facilitated continuous pro-business restructuring. Far from opposing these "rules," the unions have invoked them to suppress any struggle by workers against the corporate onslaught.

In other words, the unions function not as workers' organisations, but as an industrial police force that ruthlessly enforces the dictates of the financial elite.

Bramble's "log of claims," even if adopted, would do nothing to reduce social inequality or alleviate the deteriorating conditions confronting broad sections of the working class.

All Bramble's demands fall well within the framework of bourgeois politics. They do not propose any inroads into the wealth of the financial elite, or challenge the dominance of big business over every aspect of life. Among them are calls for a paltry increase to the minimum wage, from \$18.29 an hour to just \$22, a

reduction in working hours, guaranteed three-hour shifts for casual employees and "stiffer penalties" for employers breaching "employment standards or occupational health and safety provisions."

Significantly, the bulk of Bramble's demands are for a Labor government to expand the rights of union officials, including to access work sites. Like McManus, Socialist Alternative's sole concern is to shore up the role of the unions in the "bargaining process," where they negotiate away the jobs, wage and conditions of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

Bramble also called for Labor to boost the number of industrial inspectors, supposedly to prevent "wage theft" by big business. The real aim of government inspectors and officials is to enforce the requirements of the corporations and block workers' struggles.

Substantial material interests are at stake, not just for the ACTU, but also for Socialist Alternative. Its members are increasingly integrated into the union officialdom, which they view as a stepping stone to privileged posts and entry into the political establishment.

This month, Socialist Alternative announced that the Victorian Socialists, an electoral coalition it has formed with other pseudo-left parties to contest a seat in a state election, recently received a \$50,000 donation from the Electrical Trades Union. The union has previously donated substantial cash to Labor and the Greens. Socialist Alternative is doubtless seeking more such funds.

Like the pseudo-left as a whole, Socialist Alternative speaks for affluent sections of the upper middle-class in academia, the public sector and the union bureaucracy, whose acquisition of wealth over the past three decades has been bound up with the stock market boom and the suppression of the class struggle.

Amid a developing rebellion of workers internationally against social-democratic parties such as Labor and the unions, the pseudo-left is intensifying its efforts to prevent the emergence of a mass movement of the working class based on a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective.



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