

Australian unions shut down state Labor conference to suppress discussion of anti-refugee policy

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Factional conflicts within the Australian Labor Party have escalated following a rancorous conference of the party's Victorian state branch on May 26-27.

The tensions have been intensified by polls indicating that with a federal election slated to be held this year or next, Labor is trailing the Liberal-National Coalition government in key electorates.

Sky News reported yesterday that if a series of by-elections triggered by the ongoing purge of dual citizens from parliament had been held last weekend, Labor likely would have lost two of the seats it currently holds, Longman in Queensland and Braddon in Tasmania.

Speculation has been aired in the media that any losses of seats could be a catalyst for a challenge to Labor leader Bill Shorten. Questioned by reporters yesterday, former deputy prime minister Anthony Albanese refused to rule out a bid for leadership of the party.

Underlying the deepening crisis of Labor and all the official parliamentary parties is the hostility of broad sections of the population. At the Victorian conference, Labor made clear that if it formed federal government, it would continue the pro-business policies that have resulted in a collapse of its support among workers and young people.

Two of the country's largest trade unions, the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU), joined forces at the conference to ensure there was no discussion of Labor's anti-refugee policies.

The incident underscored the xenophobic and anti-working-class character of all the unions. The AWU is often branded as a "right-wing" union. The CFMMEU,

formed through an amalgamation of the construction, maritime and textile unions earlier this year, is promoted by liberal pundits and pseudo-left parties as "militant" and "progressive."

Making clear their essential unity of outlook, both unions did everything they could at the conference to silence opposition to the Australian state's brutal repression of asylum-seekers fleeing US-led wars and oppression.

Together, the CFMMEU and the AWU provided the blocks of votes required to defer contentious motions on refugee policy and a number of other issues to the party's backroom administrative committee. The move effectively shut down proceedings on the floor of the conference, and pushed the issues behind closed doors.

A motion had been proposed by Ilia Vurtel, a member of "Labor for Refugees," calling for the party to end the mandatory offshore detention of refugees who come to Australia by boat, and close the Australian-operated camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

The scuttling of the motion was accompanied by deferrals on calls for a meagre increase to the poverty-level Newstart unemployment allowance and recognition of Palestine. Labor's refusal to back even a token boost to Newstart demonstrates that, if elected, it will intensify cuts to welfare. The refusal to discuss the issue of Palestine is in line with Labor's support for US-led wars and military interventions around the world, and Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza.

After the conference, John Setka, the head of the CFMMEU in Victoria, declared that the deferrals represented "democracy in action." In reality, they were a desperate attempt to prevent a public

embarrassment to Shorten, and signal to the ruling elite that a Labor government would escalate the drive to war, austerity and the erosion of civil liberties.

Speaking at the conference on May 26, Shorten vowed that a Labor government would continue to abrogate the basic legal and democratic right of refugees to seek asylum. Shorten declared that Labor would “stop the boats” of refugee arrivals. “The current government would like to say that there’ll be another policy; there won’t be,” he stated, ruling out any shift in Labor’s stance.

The Labor for Refugees motion was a plea by a section of Labor for the party to adopt a more “humane” immigration posture, to head off widespread anger over the bipartisan persecution of refugees.

The motions themselves, submitted by a series of branches to the party’s national conference, now slated to be held in December, underscore the fraudulent character of the grouping’s claims to defend asylum-seekers.

The motions, cited by the *Australian* yesterday, include only mealy-mouthed appeals for Labor to “revisit its policy of never allowing asylum seekers arriving by boat to settle in Australia.” At the same time they defend the entire underlying framework of “border protection,” endorsing the maintenance of “essential maritime activity to prevent people-smuggling.”

Labor has led the way in the bipartisan attacks on refugees.

The Labor governments of prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating in the 1980s and 1990s introduced the world’s first “mandatory detention” imprisonment regime. This provided for the automatic incarceration of any asylum-seekers who arrived in Australia by boat.

This went hand-in-hand with a sweeping onslaught on the social rights of the working class, through a series of pro-business accords between the Labor governments, the trade unions and the corporate elite. The economy was deregulated and hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs destroyed.

In 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard reopened the concentration camps on Nauru and Manus Island, consigning refugees there for years of indefinite detention. The United Nations has repeatedly branded the policy, continued by the current

Coalition government, as “inhumane” and a violation of international law.

The unions have fully backed Labor’s attacks on refugees, supporting the Hawke, Keating and Gillard governments as they stepped up the assault on asylum-seekers. In 2015, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, a predecessor of the CFMMEU, voted to ensure that any challenge to mandatory offshore detention at that year’s national Labor conference was rejected.

For decades, the unions have sought to whip up hostility to immigrants and refugees, blaming them for job losses and wage cuts, in order to divide the working class along national lines, and divert attention from their own role as an industrial police force of successive governments and the corporate elite. In order to defend the profit interests of Australian capitalism, the unions have enforced a decades-long assault on jobs, wages and working conditions.



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