

Australia's peak union body lays out campaign to elect yet another big business Labor government

Oscar Grenfell
21 July 2018

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, held a revealing national congress in Brisbane on Tuesday and Wednesday. Behind empty rhetoric about mounting inequality, the assembled officials adopted plans to try to corral their dwindling memberships behind the return of another Labor government that will only deepen the attacks on working class conditions.

And while falsely claiming to oppose the corporate assault on workers, they called for a much closer integration of the unions into big business and the state apparatus, including via the appointment of union bureaucrats onto company boards.

The 800 or so delegates at the congress represented organisations in terminal decline. They are widely discredited after decades of imposing the dictates of governments and the financial elite, particularly since the ACTU's Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Union membership is at record lows of barely 10 percent across the private sector and about 5 percent among young workers.

There is intense hostility among workers over declining wages, which have fallen in real terms for six years, a rapidly rising cost of living, the gutting of full-time employment and an endless corporate offensive against conditions and wages.

The political establishment is terrified that the unions will be unable to suppress the emerging industrial and political struggles of workers, as they have for the past four decades. To shore up their position as an industrial policing agency, the unions are seeking to channel the anger among workers behind Labor, which has long been a party of the financial elite.

To that end, the unions last year initiated a "change the rules" campaign. This cynically criticises aspects of the

draconian Fair Work Australia industrial legislation—introduced by the previous Labor government with the full support of the unions, which have invoked the anti-strike provisions time and again to isolate and betray workers' struggles.

The congress underscored the fraudulent character of this campaign.

The keynote speaker was Wayne Swan, Labor's new national president, who was treasurer throughout the last Labor government from 2007 to 2013. He declared that society was "becoming more unequal, unfair and unjust." Like other speakers, he claimed to oppose the worsening inequality, and deplore the plight of low-paid workers in casual and precarious employment.

Swan said there was "something fundamentally wrong with our economy that calls for rebellion." He must hope that workers have poor memories. In office, he imposed the dictates of global capitalism and bailed out the finance houses after the 2008 economic crash. In 2011, *Euromoney* magazine named him global "finance minister of the year."

Swan not only ensured Australia's banks remained among the most profitable in the world. He was a senior figure in Julia Gillard's government as it slashed funding to education and healthcare, and kicked 100,000 single parents off their welfare benefits and onto the poverty-level Newstart unemployment allowances.

Swan is not seeking to lead a rebellion, but to prevent one. He alluded to fears that the political establishment would not be able to contain social and political opposition, declaring that "our future may very well depend" on "leadership" from Labor and the unions.

Labor leader Bill Shorten was also a featured guest. Like Swan, he was a key minister in the last Labor government, enforcing its austerity measures. Before that,

as national secretary of the Australian Workers Union from 2001 to 2007, Shorten oversaw enterprise workplace agreements with major employers, slashing the wages and penalty rates of cleaners and other low-paid workers.

Shorten reportedly made references to the deepening social hardships facing workers. The press, however, was excluded from covering his speech. Over recent months, while accusing the Turnbull Liberal-National government of pandering to big business at workers' expense, Shorten has also sought to reassure the corporate elite that a Labor government will advance its interests.

Just as revealing was the installation, unopposed, of Michele O'Neil as the new ACTU president. Her predecessor, Ged Kearney, resigned early this year and was parachuted into federal parliament, just like many previous ACTU presidents, going back to Bob Hawke.

O'Neil has been depicted in the media as a "union militant." In reality, she personifies the anti-working class character of the unions.

As the head of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU) for almost three decades, O'Neil was pivotal in the destruction of thousands of jobs, and sweeping attacks on the wages and conditions of impoverished textile workers. In 2009 alone, the TCFU, working with the Labor Party, helped clothing manufacturer Pacific Brands enforce the destruction of more than 1,850 jobs across the country.

Early this year, the TCFU amalgamated with the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Maritime Union of Australia, both of which have substantial financial resources. By that point, O'Neil's union had just 2,000 members, having enforced the pro-business shutdown of large sections of the industry that it covered.

Representing employers, Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Wilcox welcomed O'Neil's elevation. According to the Australian Associated Press, he said "employers had dealt constructively with Ms O'Neil for many years through her work at the textiles union" and "we look forward to continuing to work together on the many issues of mutual benefit."

These warm relations underscore the bogus character of the unions' claims to be leading a campaign to "change" industrial legislation in the interests of workers. The real concern motivating the "change the rules" campaign is that the unions maintain their position at the negotiating table, where they bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers they falsely claim to represent, and ensure the privileges of the officialdom. The unions

are fearful that some employers are seeking to dispense with their services.

This was made clear by the industrial relations program adopted by the congress. Its recommendations include prohibiting non-union enterprise agreements, in a bid to reverse declining union coverage and membership rates.

Most significantly, it calls for union representation on company boards, declaring that this would "allow for a culture of honesty, transparency and joint ownership in the future of the enterprise." This "mutually beneficial exchange" would "lead to better wages and higher company performance."

The references to improved wages are a sham. The "mutually beneficial exchange" would be one solely between the companies and the union bureaucrats, with the latter functioning ever more openly as the representatives of wealthy shareholders, tasked with suppressing wages, slashing conditions and eliminating jobs.

Already, the union bosses sit on the boards of multi-billion-dollar superannuation funds, joint management-union committees, and run lucrative union "charities" and "training companies" that receive corporate subsidies. Now, facing an accelerating collapse in their membership, the union bureaucrats are seeking even greater collaboration with employers.

The ACTU congress was another milestone in the right-wing, pro-business evolution of the unions. As workers enter into increasingly explosive social and political struggles, they will confront these thoroughly corporatised entities, along with the Labor Party, as their enemies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact