

Australia: Socialist Alternative promotes right-wing Labor leader Bill Shorten

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The Australian pseudo-left organisation Socialist Alternative responded to Labor's victory in a series of federal by-elections late last month by hailing the party's right-wing leader, Bill Shorten, and his strategy of using populist demagoguery to win electoral support.

Within 24 hours of Labor's July 28 wins in four of the five by-elections, Socialist Alternative published a comment by Tom Bramble, headlined "Turnbull's government comes a cropper." For a full-day, the organisation's website *RedFlag* featured a picture of a smiling Shorten and his wife celebrating on election night.

Bramble's article reads as though it were drafted by a public relations consultant for Shorten, or by one of the Labor-aligned unions with which Socialist Alternative closely collaborates.

It declared that Labor's victories in the Queensland seat of Longman and the Tasmanian seat of Braddon, demonstrated that "Labor's strategy of running an 'us versus them' campaign—'money for hospitals not the banks'—worked a treat."

The article favourably cited Labor leader Bill Shorten and national president Wayne Swan. It declared that Swan "was dead right in summing up the lessons" when he stated that the results were a rejection of Turnbull's program of corporate tax cuts and "trickle-down economics."

Bramble continued: "Labor demonstrated in Longman that it can win by tapping into popular discontent. As leader Bill Shorten said: 'Voters want to see better hospitals, not bigger banks. They want to see pensioners prioritised, not multinational company taxation cuts. They want to see our schools properly funded; they don't want to see corporations get large tax cuts.'"

In other words, Bramble presented as good coin

Labor's utterly fraudulent claims to be defending healthcare and education. The *RedFlag* article did not mention that Shorten was a senior minister in the previous federal Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, which cut billions of dollars from both sectors and opened them up to the full force of the capitalist market. Instead, it absurdly declared that "big business hates" Shorten's populist demagoguery and asserted that he was being subjected to a "destabilisation" campaign.

Significantly, the *RedFlag* article identified Socialist Alternative with Shorten in the ongoing factional conflicts within the Labor Party. It declared that the by-election results were a "blow to Shorten's enemies inside the ALP," who it claimed "want to push the party to the right." The article counterposed Shorten's rhetoric to openly pro-business statements by Labor figures such as Anthony Albanese and others.

In reality, Shorten's posturing over social inequality is so much hot air. He and Labor shadow treasurer Chris Bowen have both signalled their support for the sweeping corporate tax cuts they claimed to oppose during the by-election campaigns.

Moreover, a Labor government, upon taking office, would immediately "discover" a budget black hole, backtrack on its promises of limited funding increases and implement further austerity measures.

Labor's pro-business program was underscored by an event held the week following the by-elections. The party held a two-day business summit, with hundreds of corporate CEOs paying thousands of dollars for "exclusive access to Labor leader Bill Shorten and his senior economic team."

The event was one indication that sections of big business, frustrated with the inability of the Coalition government to impose their demands for sweeping

austerity measures, are considering throwing their weight behind the election of a federal Labor government.

To secure such an outcome, however, a campaign is required to lessen the unprecedented hostility that exists in the working class toward not only the Coalition, but Labor as well.

Contrary to Socialist Alternative's claims, the Longman and Braddon by-elections did not result in a significant turn back to Labor. In Longman, despite a major swing away from the government, Labor's vote increased by just 4 percent, far below the rise for right-wing populist candidates posing as opponents of both parties. In Braddon, Labor was dependent upon the second preference votes of a so-called "anti-politician" candidate.

Under conditions of chronic political instability, Socialist Alternative, speaking for an affluent layer of the upper-middle class embedded in the trade unions, the public sector and academia, has offered its services to try and boost support for Labor by covering up the record of Shorten and sowing illusions that his "anti-business" rhetoric is genuine.

Shorten in fact personifies the pro-business character of the Labor and trade union apparatus. As national secretary of the Australian Workers Union, prior to entering federal parliament, Shorten oversaw a series of union-brokered enterprise agreements with major corporations that slashed the wages and conditions of cleaners and other low-paid sections of workers.

US diplomatic cables, published by WikiLeaks, revealed that Shorten, along with other trade union and Labor Party officials, had operated as a "protected US source" for years. In other words, he has acted as an informant for the US government and intelligence agencies. Shorten is a trusted proponent of the US-Australia military alliance and Australia's integration into the massive US military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, initiated under the Gillard Labor government, in preparation for war with China.

Socialist Alternative's promotion of such a figure is in large part bound up with its relations with the union apparatus. The Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), which Socialist Alternative fraudulently presents as a "left-wing" and "militant" union, is a key base of support for Shorten.

Earlier this year, the CFMMEU intervened to shut

down the Victorian Labor Party conference to prevent motions from being moved that criticised Shorten's support for the bipartisan program of consigning asylum-seekers who arrive in Australia by boat to squalid detention camps in the Pacific. Socialist Alternative, which regularly claims to defend refugees, did not say a word.

In every industrial dispute, Socialist Alternative functions as a cheerleader for the corporatised unions. It invariably covers up their role in enforcing the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions, and suppressing any independent political or industrial struggle.

Socialist Alternative has also promoted the unions' bogus "Change the rules" campaign. Union officials have postured as opponents of the Fair Work industrial legislation, which was introduced by the previous federal Labor government with the full support of the unions themselves. The cynical marketing effort, hailed by *RedFlag*, is explicitly aimed at channeling workers back into supporting Labor.

Amid a developing radicalisation of workers and young people, which presages major social struggles, Socialist Alternative is moving to shore-up not only Labor, but the parliamentary system as a whole.



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