

The political issues posed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions' "Change the Rules" campaign

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Many workers across Australia will take part in union rallies on October 23 to express their opposition to the corporate offensive against jobs, wages and working conditions, and the assault on social spending being prosecuted by the federal and state governments. However, the openly stated aim of the "Change the Rules" protests organised by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is to channel these sentiments into the election of yet another big business federal Labor government.

The entire campaign is fraudulent. In its material, the ACTU and its secretary Sally McManus have highlighted soaring inequality, exemplified by the fact that the richest one percent of the population owns more wealth than the poorest 70 percent. The unions have denounced the prevalence of casual and contract labour, which now accounts for up to half the entire workforce, condemned to stagnant and falling pay.

Left out of the ACTU rhetoric is the reality that all these conditions that workers face are the outcome of the decades-long collaboration by the unions with the corporations and successive governments, both Labor and Coalition.

The very "Fair Work Australia" industrial legislation the unions claim to be fighting to change was imposed by Labor with their support.

In 2007, the ACTU and its affiliates launched the "Your Rights at Work" campaign, upon which "Change the Rules" is modelled. The aim was to channel hostility to the Coalition government of John Howard, and its Work Choices industrial relations regime, into the election of Labor.

One of the first acts of the new Rudd-Gillard Labor government was to pass the Fair Work legislation, which retained most of the draconian provisions of Work Choices. The laws, which illegalised virtually all industrial action and cleared the path for continuous pro-business restructuring, were praised and fully backed by the unions.

Ever since, Labor and the unions have invoked the Fair Work legislation to suppress any political or industrial struggle by workers. Time and again, they have insisted that workers end strike action, accept wage cuts and acquiesce to sackings, because they have been given the green light by the pro-

business Fair Work Commission, which the union apparatus asserts is an "independent umpire."

The Fair Work regime itself was the outcome of the assault on the conditions of the working class that was launched after the coming to power of the Hawke-Keating Labor government in 1983.

The so-called Accords between the Labor government, the ACTU and the major employers facilitated a vast restructuring and deregulation of the economy. As part of this agenda, the unions enforced the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and abolished the shop stewards' committees and other forms of rank-and-file workplace organisation that called for opposition to the demands of the corporations for "international competitiveness".

The result was the fastest growth of social inequality since the end of World War II and a social disaster in working class areas. Entire generations of workers and youth have been condemned to a future of precarious work and low wages.

In the 1990s, the ACTU backed the Labor government of Paul Keating when it introduced the modern system of enterprise bargaining. This ended industry-wide negotiations over conditions, and tied workers to the immediate profit demands of their individual companies.

The complicity of the unions in the attack on the working class is starkly revealed in the virtual disappearance of strikes, the most elementary form of workers' struggle against the employers. Since the introduction of enterprise bargaining, and especially since the imposition of the Fair Work legislation, the number of strikes has fallen to its lowest level in Australian history.

The unions have presided over one enterprise agreement after another which have slashed real wages, eliminated conditions and destroyed jobs.

The Australian Workers Union, for instance, including when it was led by current Labor leader Bill Shorten, signed secret agreements with major employers that cut wages and abolished penalty rates for some of the country's lowest-paid workers, including cleaners and agricultural labourers.

Across the fast-food and service sectors, penalty rates are

virtually a thing of the past, along with sick and holiday leave and a living wage, after years of sweetheart deals between the unions and major transnational companies.

In the manufacturing sector, the unions have overseen the shutdown of the car industry and the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs at the ports, in the steel and mining sectors, textiles and other industries.

The ACTU officials running the “Change the Rules” campaign apparently hope that workers suffer collective amnesia and have forgotten their bitter experiences with the Labor Party and the unions themselves over the past 30 years.

In a speech this month, McManus declared: “We have so often turned to the Labor Party to enact legislation that ensures working people have the rights they need.” She claimed that Labor was “the party of full employment” and “has the track record on reform that benefits the workers of Australia.”

As the record demonstrates, these are transparent and shameless lies.

If Labor returns to power, it will be a government of, for and by big business and the wealthiest layers of society, no different to the Coalition. Amid the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, the next government will cut education, healthcare and welfare, escalate Australia’s alignment with the militarist US-led confrontation against China and intensify the attacks on democratic rights, including the persecution of refugees.

The changes to industrial relations laws that the ACTU is proposing a Labor government introduce are not intended to improve workers’ conditions, but assist the corporations continue to drive them down.

In her recent speech, McManus reiterated the ACTU’s call for the abolition of enterprise bargaining and the re-establishment of industry-wide agreements. She said that this was necessary because enterprise bargaining was no longer delivering sufficient boosts to “productivity,” i.e. cuts to employers’ costs and ever-greater profits.

Industry-wide bargaining, McManus declared, would allow “business owners” and unions “to come together to improve productivity.” McManus called for even greater powers for the Fair Work Commission, declaring that it should be able to arbitrate disputes to “make bargaining more efficient and resolve situations when groups cannot see past their own conflict to the point of common ground.”

In other words, McManus is advocating for an industrial relations system in which a handful of union officials, Fair Work bureaucrats and corporate representatives come together and impose cost-cutting agreements upon tens of thousands of workers across entire industries. McManus has previously cited Germany, where union officials sit on company and state boards alongside government employers, as a model to be emulated.

The fraudulent rhetoric over social inequality by the ACTU is simply an attempt by the discredited union apparatus to try and keep control over workers. The unions are terrified by the

resurgence of the class struggle internationally, which this year alone has seen mass strikes by teachers in the US, lecturers in the UK, nurses in New Zealand and millions of workers across the Indian subcontinent and China—in opposition to the official trade unions.

In every struggle that emerges internationally, the unions function as strikebreakers and company agents. In an era of globalised production and capitalist crisis, the unions, based on a nationalist and pro-capitalist program, operate as the representatives of their “own” national ruling class. They seek to ensure that national industry remains “internationally competitive” by forcing down wages and eliminating conditions.

In Australia and around the world, workers need to establish their political independence from the unions by forming new organisations of struggle, including independent workplace committees and workers’ councils. Such organisations would reject the collaboration of the unions with the corporations, unite workers across entire industries and countries and spearhead a genuine counter-offensive against the corporate onslaught.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective and the building of a mass, international socialist political movement of the working class.

The capitalist system has failed. It cannot be reformed. The future being offered under capitalism is economic crisis and the growing danger of a third world war that would see the catastrophic use of nuclear weapons. In country after country, the ruling class is preparing for dictatorial forms of rule by attacking fundamental democratic rights and promoting nationalist, anti-immigrant right-wing and fascistic organisations.

The international working class is the vast majority of the population. Its labour power produces all society’s wealth. Its social and democratic rights can only be defended, and dictatorship and war prevented, by uniting internationally in the common struggle for world socialism.

This means the fight to establish workers’ governments, which would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, and carrying out a far-reaching redistribution of wealth to end social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for this perspective. All workers who want genuine social change should join our movement.



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