

Australian Labor Party prepares for government amid political and economic turmoil

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The Australian Labor Party is holding its national conference in Adelaide, starting Sunday, amid rising working-class struggles and popular discontent globally, intensifying geo-political tensions and signs of a looming recession in Australia.

With the current minority Liberal-National Coalition government disintegrating and an election due by next May, the Labor Party will paper over its deep internal divisions at the three-day gathering as it prepares for government.

Since the 2008 global financial breakdown, successive governments, both Labor and Coalition, have been torn apart by the deepening political and economic conflicts. Installed in August, Scott Morrison is the seventh prime minister since 2007.

During the same period, the memberships of both the Labor Party and its affiliated trade unions have plunged to new lows—a measure of the disaffection in the working class after repeated experiences of the destruction of jobs, conditions and basic services at the hands of Labor governments and the unions.

Bill Shorten’s Labor leadership is simultaneously making two pitches. One is to attempt to quell the seething hostility to the political establishment by offering vague promises of reducing inequality.

The other is to seek the backing of big business, and Washington, for a government that can divert or suppress unrest, impose the corporate elite’s austerity requirements and prepare for further US-led wars.

In his official welcome message to conference delegates, Labor Party National President Wayne Swan gave some indication of Labor’s fears. He referenced the political disaffection and re-emerging class struggle, which is now wracking all the long-standing political parties, from the “Yellow Vest” movement in France to the crisis gripping the May government in Britain and the Trump administration in the US.

Swan, who was the country’s national treasurer

throughout the last Labor government from 2007 to 2013, warned: “Politics in so many parts of the world today have become populist, ragged and ugly. At the same time, we have seen parties representing hundreds of years of democratic tradition in their countries put to the sword, either by the electorate or by internal insurgencies—sometimes by both.”

The 224-page “final draft platform” for the December 16–18 conference reflects that anxiety. It commits a Labor government to “restore trust and faith” in the parliamentary order, amid worsening social inequality, a “disrupted world” driven by the US-China conflict and danger signs of an economic crash.

“Too many Australians are disengaged from their democracy and distrustful of their representatives; too many people suspect politicians are only in it for themselves—and too often they are right,” the draft platform warns.

Hence, under the banner of “A Fair Go for Australia,” the document claims that “Labor’s mission is to create a more equal and inclusive society.” It holds out the prospect of “a fairer distribution of political and economic power, wealth and income.”

This typifies the platform’s vacuous language, however. Throughout the sections on health, education, housing, welfare and disability programs, there is virtually nothing concrete on what a Labor government would do to reverse the deteriorating conditions in these essential services.

At the same time, the document vows, in its opening section, to ensure a “responsible fiscal policy.” In fact, as part of Labor’s pitch to big business, Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen has pledged to deliver “bigger budget surpluses” than the Coalition government. This inevitably means further reducing social spending.

While the platform declares that “inequality has risen over the past generation,” it omits the fact that this process initiated by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of 1983–96 and accelerated under the Rudd-Gillard Labor

administrations of 2007–13.

On the contrary, the document hails these governments for “economic reform through the Hawke and Keating years” and “seeing Australia through the [2008–09] global financial crisis without recession.”

Working in close partnership with the trade unions, Hawke and Keating enforced the greatest ever-redistribution of wealth and taxes to benefit the financial elite, while Rudd and Gillard bailed out the banks and finance houses, all at the expense of the jobs and conditions of the working class.

Significantly, the platform also lauds previous Labor governments for “the creation of a genuinely national economy in wartime.” This is a revealing reference to Labor’s role as the preeminent capitalist party of war and crisis, having been called to office during the 1930s Great Depression and both world wars.

A nationalist and militarist thread runs through the document, starting with the slogan, which refers to “a fair go” for “Australia,” not for “Australians” or “Australian working people.” It sets out a program to shore up the interests of Australian imperialism, especially in the face of escalating US-China tensions.

Its unequivocal pro-US orientation contrasts with that of the Coalition, which has been wracked by rifts generated by the dependence of major sections of business on Chinese markets. Just before he was ousted in August, ex-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had sought to repair relations with Beijing, as he tried to balance between the US and China.

Noting China’s rise as a “great power and global economic giant,” the platform declares that the US alliance is “critical to Australia’s national security requirements in vitally important areas,” including intelligence, military equipment and “the US’ long-term role in underpinning broader stability in the region.”

In reality, the Trump administration, intensifying the confrontational stance begun by the Obama administration, is destabilising the Indo-Pacific by instigating a trade and economic war against China and continuing the US military build-up throughout the region.

Given the massive profits at stake in China, Labor’s platform pays lip service to extending “Australia’s engagement with China.” But it echoes Washington in blaming “pre-emptive claims to oceanic features” for producing “potential flashpoints in our region.”

Without explicitly naming China, this is an obvious reference to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Turnbull’s government had declined US requests to send warships and planes into these areas to join provocative US “freedom of navigation” operations.

The document pledges to further ramp up military

spending, on top of the \$200 billion already promised by the Coalition government over the next decade, and “foster a strong national defence industry.” This “must become a national mission,” uniting business, the trade unions, all tiers of government and the “vocational and tertiary institutions.”

Without openly declaring the need to prepare for war, the platform insists on ensuring “sovereign capability” by producing military weapons in Australia “to the greatest extent possible.” No mention is made of the billions of dollars required for this expansion.

Anticipating unrest, the platform commits a Labor government to ensure that the “security” agencies and police can “acquire such additional powers they may need to meet the changing national security threats.”

To enhance the industrial policing role of the trade unions, the document pledges to facilitate “multi-employer collective bargaining” and include unions “alongside business, community and other appropriate interests in constituted boards, committees and consultative bodies.”

This is in line with the Australian Council of Trade Unions’ “Change the Rules” campaign, which is seeking to stem the rapid loss of union members, especially among young and the lowest-paid workers, and incorporate the unions into German-style corporatist partnerships with big business.

On refugee policy, the platform commits Labor to retaining offshore detention and “robust border security measures.” This is code for militarily repelling refugee boats.

An editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* on Wednesday signalled the readiness of key sections of the ruling class to support Labor’s return to office. It contrasted “Shorten Labor’s discipline, unity and political skills” with “the Coalition’s tendency to fall into amateur-hour chaos.”

The test of Shorten’s “mettle” would come at the national conference, the editorial insisted, specifying strict adherence to the anti-refugee policy, plans for “flexible workplaces to deliver productivity” and Bowen’s commitment to “bigger budget surpluses.”

These are the marching orders for the Labor and union leadership at the conference and beyond.



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