

“Lefts” ensure stage-managed Australian Labor Party conference

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During the days leading up to Australian Labor Party’s three-day national conference, which begins in Adelaide tomorrow, some media reports have suggested that it could feature democratic, or even “flashpoint” debates.

The prospect has been raised that members of what is misleadingly called Labor’s “Left” faction could raise certain differences on issues such as refugees, industrial relations and welfare payments.

In reality, the factional powerbrokers, who control the party and its affiliated unions, have been holding intensive backroom negotiations for days, to ensure that this will be the most carefully-orchestrated conference ever.

Even the token, set-piece “debates” of previous conferences, held every three or four years, will be brushed aside. Nothing can be permitted to upset the party’s preparations to form another pro-business government, to replace the rapidly unraveling Liberal-National Coalition.

Labor’s leaders are acutely conscious of intensifying hostility among working people and youth toward the entire political establishment, including the Labor Party, after decades of worsening inequality, destruction of jobs and conditions, and involvement in US-led wars.

That is why attempts are being made to create illusions that Labor, which has been reduced to nothing but a bureaucratic shell, after propping up capitalist rule for more than a century, retains some semblance of democratic life.

The truth, however, is that everyone involved, not least the Left faction, is completely complicit in the party’s thoroughly right-wing, Washington-aligned and pro-war trajectory.

For decades, Labor Party conferences have been little

more than stage-managed vehicles for rubber-stamping the requirements of the corporate elite—from the pro-market economic restructuring and privatisations of the Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996, to the Gillard government’s alignment behind the Obama administration’s anti-China “pivot” to Asia in 2011.

Back in the 1980s, the nominally “left” wing of the Labor Party, then called the “Socialist Left,” was still able to command significant support in the working class, by exploiting mistaken hopes that the party could be pushed in a progressive, or even socialist, direction.

Those days have long gone. But the Left faction has continued to serve as a vital prop in a succession of Labor governments. In fact, all the current leaders of the faction—such as deputy party leader Tanya Plibersek, former Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and former Finance Minister Penny Wong—served as senior ministers in the last Labor government.

They all worked seamlessly with both Prime Minister Julia Gillard, herself a member of their faction, and Labor leader Bill Shorten, a progeny of the Right faction, which played a pivotal role in installing Gillard as prime minister in 2010. She came to power in order to execute Canberra’s unconditional commitment to Washington, complete with the stationing of US marines in Darwin.

This year, no public debate will be permitted, even on the one issue where previous “debates” have been carefully stage-managed—Labor’s bipartisan agreement with the Liberal-National Coalition government’s brutal anti-refugee policy. And this is despite growing public revulsion toward the military’s repulsion of asylum seekers’ boats, and the indefinite detention of refugees on remote Pacific islands.

Before Labor’s last national conference in 2015,

Shorten effectively pre-empted the gathering by announcing, on its eve, that a Labor government would retain the Coalition's boat "turnbacks" and "offshore" detention measures.

This year, the Left leaders are doing likewise. In repeated media performances, Plibersek, Albanese and Wong have ruled out any, even cosmetic, opposition to the draconian refugee regime, which brazenly flouts international refugee law, as well as the fundamental democratic right to seek asylum.

Albanese declared that the "existing policy" had been "successful" in stopping refugee "arrivals." That this is regarded as a "success" underscores the anti-working class character of the Labor Party. Workers should have the right to live and work in whichever country they choose, with full citizenship rights, not be detained indefinitely in squalid conditions.

Australian military forces have repelled an unknown number of boats. Internationally, an estimated 65 million people have fled their homelands, overwhelmingly due to military interventions in the Middle East by the US and its partners, including Australia.

At the 2015 conference, the Left orchestrated a one-hour debate on an amendment to oppose boat turnbacks. Its purpose was to create the impression of a healthy democratic culture inside the Labor Party and a phony show of compassion. Despite several theatrical speeches of opposition, journalists were informed, in advance, that a Left faction amendment rejecting the practice would be defeated after a token show of hands.

This year, such an amendment is unlikely to even make it to the floor. Cross-factional meetings have been conducted to fashion an innocuous amendment to the draft party platform. Whatever its final form, any amendment will be designed to support the anti-refugee regime, while holding out a pretence that Labor can provide a less vicious means of enforcing it.

The proposal may adopt a version of a bill that Labor supported in the Senate last week. It actually permitted doctors to recommend the evacuation of some of the seriously-ill and traumatised refugees from the camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Nevertheless, Plibersek and others have emphasised that the final decisions must remain in the hands of the immigration minister.

This is in keeping with Labor's foul record. In the

1980s and 1990s, the "left" immigration ministers, Gerry Hand and Stewart West, spearheaded Labor's anti-refugee policies under the Hawke and Keating governments. These governments introduced the mandatory detention regime for all asylum seekers, setting a global precedent.

The Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013 reopened the Nauru and Manus detention centres, imprisoning hundreds of refugees, many of whom remain incarcerated today.

Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* editorial on Wednesday praised Shorten, saying he had "nailed his colours to the mast on boat turnbacks and offshore processing." As in 2015, Shorten's stance, embraced by the Left faction, has sent a broader signal to the capitalist class.

With Prime Minister Scott Morrison's Coalition government being torn apart by its most right-wing elements, Labor is anxiously preparing a government that will be committed to reliably imposing the corporate agenda of austerity, pro-US militarism and state repression.



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