

Australian union leader warns of eruption of working class struggle

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This week's three-day Australian Labor Party national conference in Adelaide ended as it began, with anxious warnings that rising "anger and frustration" in the working class could erupt out of the control of the party and its trade union partners.

"The trade union movement in our country is sounding an alarm," Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus told the conference at the start of her speech on Tuesday. "Working people are crying out for action on insecure work and crying out for fair pay rises."

McManus invoked the spectre of a literal tsunami of social unrest. "The trade union movement is an early warning sign of the tremors before the waves meet the coast," McManus pleaded. "We must take action now."

The union bureaucrats are well aware that millions of workers are outraged by soaring social inequality, falling real wages and the destruction of full-time jobs, accompanied by rising rates of casualisation and the ripping up of previously hard-won working conditions.

Discontent is building up among young workers, who are suffering the worst exploitation in what the corporate media dubs the new "gig economy." Only half of 25-year-old workers have full-time work, despite 60 percent having tertiary education qualifications.

McManus's prominent role at the conference, and the content of her presentation, pointed to how closely the party and union leaders are working together to try to suppress working class discontent and channel it behind the return of yet another pro-business Labor government.

The ACTU leader was given pride of place on the speakers' list, and received a standing ovation from the assembled party and union delegations. Party leader Bill Shorten waived his right to second the moving of the party's industrial relations platform, in order to allocate her the task.

McManus warned that unless the role of the unions was bolstered via changes to industrial laws, the discontent of workers would boil over. "The anger and frustration will find an outlet, and it's already happening," she said. "Too many people feel angry."

Her remarks paralleled those of party president Wayne Swan and party leader Bill Shorten on the opening day of the conference. Swan said "political chaos everywhere you look" threatened the political establishment. Shorten warned of mounting "distrust and disengagement, scepticism and cynicism."

Since being installed as ACTU leader in March 2017, McManus has been depicted by the media as a militant "left" leader. Yet she lauded Shorten, a hated long-time Australian Workers Union (AWU) bureaucrat who repeatedly betrayed low-paid workers—such as casual cleaners—by signing deals with employers that stripped away their after-hours penalty rates.

Shorten was "someone special," who had "lived and breathed every day" the struggles of workers, McManus enthused.

Shorten also helped engineer the removal of Kevin Rudd as prime minister in 2010, as a "protected source" of the American embassy, in order to align Labor totally behind Washington's "pivot" to Asia to combat China. He became a workplace relations "super-minister" under Julia Gillard, policing the Labor government's anti-strike laws.

While McManus portrayed the unions as fighting inequality, low wages and insecure work, she issued a plea for even closer collaboration with big business. The unions were "ready to extend the hand of friendship and co-operation to every good employer who also wants to live in a fair society," she emphasised, to loud applause.

Shorten broadcast the same message when he spoke at the end of the session to sum up the industrial relations platform. "Co-operation, consensus, working together ... that is the spirit in which we will approach our wages policy," he said.

The Labor leader indicated he would try to emulate former Prime Minister Bob Hawke by bringing the unions and employers together at a summit to plan how to impose a new accord on workers.

Shorten announced that in his first week as prime minister he would convene meetings with employers and unions to develop a "process of getting the wages of Australia moving

again.”

He said Labor’s industrial relations policy would not simply be a re-run of the prices and incomes accords through which Hawke and his successor, Paul Keating worked in partnership with the ACTU from 1983 to 1996. Shorten said an exact copy was not possible because the labour market had changed dramatically since 1983, particularly because of the vast growth of temporary, casual, part-time and labour-hire employment.

What Shorten did not mention, of course, is that the sweeping elimination of full-time work and associated conditions like holiday and sick leave, along with the slashing of jobs, conditions and pay, was a product of the Accords policed by the unions. Subsequent governments, Labor and Coalition, deepened the attacks on the working class.

Shorten and McManus both expressed concern that a central mechanism in that process, the enterprise bargaining system introduced by the ACTU and the Keating government in the 1990s, had broken down. “Enterprise bargaining is in retreat,” Shorten warned, noting that the rate of new agreements struck between unions and employers had fallen to its lowest level since its inauguration.

Likewise, shadow workplace relations minister Brendan O’Connor said enterprise bargaining was “faltering” or “failing altogether.” He said this was causing greater inequality, which was “stunting economic growth.”

In reality, the enterprise bargaining system, which outlaws all strikes except during restricted union-employer “bargaining periods” at individual workplaces, has been used by the unions to drive down real wages and conditions, and boost corporate profits to a record post-World War II share of national income.

The resulting hostility of workers towards the unions has seen their memberships crash to record low levels—around 10 percent in the private sector. This is the underlying reason for the decline of union-employer enterprise agreements.

Most of the corporate media coverage of the Labor Party conference focussed on the danger of a “wages breakout” via the introduction of a “multi-employer bargaining” policy by a Labor government. For the past year, the ACTU has been running a phoney “Change the Rules” campaign, proposing changes to the “Fair Work” industrial relations legislation to try to restore the unions’ grip over wide layers of workers.

In essence, the unions have called for an incoming Labor government to amend the Fair Work Act, which the last Labor government imposed with the total support of the unions, so they can assert “bargaining rights,” and therefore control over, entire industries currently with very few union members.

The vague resolution agreed by the party and union leaders declared that a Labor government would modify the Fair Work Act to “improve access to collective bargaining, including, where appropriate, through multi-employer collective bargaining.”

To pretend that this policy would assist poorly-paid workers, the resolution said this was a particular issue for industries where “employees are low paid and where they lack industrial power.” But Shorten and O’Connor indicated that “multi-employer bargaining” could be extended to other industries, as part of Labor’s bid for a new “consensus” between business and the unions.

To divert attention from this underlying policy, and with an election looming, Shorten reiterated a series of previous cosmetic pledges. He said a Labor government would reverse some cuts to after-hours penalty pay rates for hospitality and retail workers, “crack down” on casualisation and labour-hire employment, and give the Fair Work Commission authority to grant “equal pay” to female workers.

Labor also would abolish the Liberal-National Coalition government’s union watchdogs, the Australian Building and Construction Commission, and the Registered Organisations Commission. This would still leave all workers under the threat of imprisonment or massive fines for taking industrial action outside narrow bargaining periods.

With the Coalition government visibly unravelling, Shorten concluded the conference by declaring that Labor and the unions were “more united, energised and determined than ever.” Behind empty rhetoric about a “fair go for all,” the Labor and union leaders have used this conference to prepare a government that will seek to stifle and crush the mounting working class unrest.



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