

Workers should reject Australian unions' "Change the rules" campaign

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In the federal election campaign, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates are spending millions of dollars on a slick advertising operation under the slogan "Change the rules."

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidates call on workers to reject this bogus union campaign with the contempt that it deserves.

As they have in every previous election, the unions are seeking to channel mounting social discontent behind the election of a Labor government.

Such a government would be a pro-war instrument of the banks and big business, committed to deepening Australia's involvement in predatory US-led military operations and forcing the working class to pay for the deepening crisis of capitalism.

The hypocrisy of the campaign is demonstrated by the fact that the "rules" the ACTU is claiming to oppose—FairWorkAustralia industrial legislation—were imposed by the last Labor government, with the full support of all of the unions.

In the 2007 federal election, the unions spent \$10 million on a "Your rights at work" campaign, aimed at ousting the Liberal-National government of John Howard. They claimed that the coming to power of Labor would be a blow against Howard's hated WorkChoices industrial legislation.

What was the result?

In 2009, the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd introduced Fair Work, retaining all of the draconian provisions of WorkChoices and introducing new attacks. Labor's laws banned virtually all industrial action, created the conditions for the victimisation of militant workers and set in place the framework for a continuous offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

Ever since, the trade unions have invoked Fair Work

to suppress industrial and political action by workers, and to enforce countless pro-business enterprise agreements.

It is the unions, and Labor, that are responsible for unprecedented social inequality, exemplified by the fact that the richest 1 percent of the population controls more wealth than the bottom 70 percent. Union-brokered deals have resulted in record low wage growth and wages and salaries as a percentage of gross domestic product falling to its lowest level in history.

The unions are not calling for the abolition of the anti-working class "rules," merely for them to be "changed."

This is not an accident. The ACTU, while seeking to exploit anger over the growing social crisis and the assault on workers' rights, has issued virtually no concrete policies in its "Change the rules" campaign.

It sheds crocodile tears over falling wages, mounting poverty, growing casualisation and the suppression of strikes, all of which are the result of policies implemented by the ACTU itself.

However, the only specific policies the ACTU has outlined, are aimed at shoring up the wealth and privileges of the union bureaucracy at the expense of workers.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus has denounced workers who refuse to join the unions as "freeloaders." She has called for greater "institutional support" for the unions, i.e., from the government and corporations. McManus has hailed the "German model," where unions are openly integrated into the state and company management.

Amid falling memberships, the unions are calling for the reintroduction of "pattern bargaining." They have made clear, this would be aimed at signing pro-company enterprise agreements, covering workplaces at

which the unions do not even have any members.

Most significantly, the ACTU has called for the strengthening of the Fair Work Commission (FWC), as an “independent umpire.” In reality, the FWC is an instrument of the corporations, which has upheld mass sackings, wage cuts and the destruction of working conditions.

This is a warning that the unions are prepared to carry out a deeper assault on the working class after the elections, in collaboration with Labor.

The unions are thoroughly corporatised entities, which have worked with governments and big business, for decades.

The ACTU, and its affiliates, struck a series of Accords in the 1980s with major corporations and the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. These provided for the deregulation of the economy, the shutting down of shop stewards’ committees and other forms of rank-and-file organisation and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs across manufacturing and other industries.

In the 1990s, the unions supported the Keating Labor government’s introduction of enterprise bargaining, dividing workers, employer by employer, and tying them to the speedup and profit demands of their individual companies.

Since then, unions across the board have signed agreements mandating real wage cuts, the elimination of penalty wage rates, and the destruction of long-standing working conditions, resulting in an unprecedented growth of part-time, casual and contract labour, record low wage growth and growing poverty.

Labor leader Bill Shorten, who is being presented by the unions as a champion of “fairness” and “equality,” personifies the anti-working class character of the unions. From 1998, he headed the Victorian state division of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), before being appointed its national leader in 2001.

The AWU signed secret deals with major cleaning companies, farming concerns and other corporations, stripping low-paid workers of weekend and overtime penalty rates, abolishing most of their entitlements and placing them on poverty wages. In a number of cases, the companies paid the employees’ union dues to the union, without the workers being aware.

Similar sordid deals have been carried out by virtually every union.

The record demonstrates that workers can only defend their social rights through a rebellion against the trade unions. The claim that Labor, a party of big business, is a “lesser-evil” must also be rejected.

Amid a growing upsurge of the working class internationally, new organisations of struggle are required. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, should be established at all workplaces, to coordinate an industrial and political fightback against the corporate offensive, to break the isolation imposed by the unions and to unite all sections of the working class.

Such committees, however, require a new political perspective, that rejects the corporatism and nationalism of the unions.

What is required is nothing less than the fight for workers’ governments, in Australia and internationally, that would place the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. This is the only way to end poverty and inequality, and guarantee the social right to well-paid full-time employment and publicly funded services to all.

That is the socialist, internationalist and revolutionary program for which the SEP and its candidates are fighting.

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