

Australian Labor Party's new leader signals further pro-business shift

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The Labor Party's new leader Anthony Albanese has outlined a more explicit right-wing and pro-big business program following the party's debacle in the May 18 federal election.

Albanese has vowed to forge closer ties to business, boost "wealth creation," rather than "wealth distribution," and pursue bipartisanship with the extreme right-wing Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Despite widespread popular hostility toward the Coalition, Labor was unable to make a credible appeal to large sections of youth and working people, who simply did not believe its phoney "fairness" rhetoric and token promises of slightly higher social spending.

Now Albanese has junked that populist pitch, which sought to head off seething discontent over widening social inequality, declining working and living conditions, and worsening social services.

Labor is appealing for common ground with the Coalition. Upon being confirmed as party leader unopposed yesterday, Albanese said Labor would not automatically block government legislation. "Some reforms require bipartisan support," he declared.

As a result of intense factional wheeling and dealing over the past week, all other leadership contenders dropped out, allowing Albanese, a leader of the party's nominal "Left" faction, to win without a party ballot.

This was after a front-page interview in the Murdoch media's *Australian* last week in which Albanese described the supposed anti-business language of Labor's election campaign as "terrible" and declared that "unions and employers have a common interest." He declared: "Successful businesses are a precondition for employing more workers, and that is obvious."

The trade union bureaucrats certainly have a "common interest" with the employers. It consists of enforcing the profit dictates of the corporate elite, at the direct expense

of the jobs, wages and social conditions of the working class. "Successful businesses"—such as Amazon, Microsoft and the banks—are those that exploit workers the most ruthlessly.

Albanese signalled a return to the blatant pro-corporate orientation of the previous Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (1983 to 1996) and Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard (2007 to 2013).

"I believe in a strong economy," he told a media conference yesterday. "Our 27 years of uninterrupted economic growth began with Labor reform and I had a very good discussion with Paul Keating yesterday."

Throughout these Labor governments, the unions worked hand-in-glove with Labor to impose sweeping financial deregulation, privatisations, job destruction and cuts to health, education, housing, welfare and other social programs, resulting in a vast transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich.

Albanese boasted of his strong relationship with the Business Council of Australia. He also criticised the Coalition for the "four worst years on record" in allowing public debt to blow out. This amounts to a pledge to help further slash social spending.

Like Julia Gillard—Labor's last "Left" leader—Albanese has been tasked with using his false left-wing credentials, and his support base in trade union and upper middle class inner-city areas, to impose the next wave of pro-capitalist "reform" on the working class.

Albanese has a proven track record. He long ago dropped his "left" posturing of the years before he entered parliament in 1996. He was a key cabinet minister, and leader of the government in the House of Representatives, under Rudd and Gillard, culminating in his elevation to deputy prime minister after Rudd's brief return as prime minister in 2013.

Albanese therefore bears a particular responsibility for the program of the Rudd and Gillard governments, which

banned virtually all industrial action under their “Fair Work” laws, aligned Australia with US plans for war against China, reopened brutal refugee detention camps on remote Pacific islands and propped up the banks and financial elite following the 2008 global economic breakdown.

Significantly, despite leading Labor to a humiliating loss, outgoing Labor leader Bill Shorten sought to block Albanese’s anointment. However, all the potential challengers—current party deputy leader Tanya Plibersek, and “Right” faction representatives, shadow treasurer Chris Bowen and Jim Chalmers—pulled out after other leading “Right” figures publicly backed Albanese.

According to the *Australian*, Albanese had given “an unequivocal commitment” to the “Right” factional bosses “to steer the party back to the policy centre, which had provided the ballast for 13 years of Labor government under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.”

None of the Labor leaders has the slightest difference with this pro-market, big business program. For now, they regard Albanese as the best salesman for them, fearing the eruption of working class opposition.

Nevertheless sharp tensions are wracking Labor, reflected in Shorten’s bid to stop Albanese and Shorten’s insistence, as a “Right” Labor and union powerbroker, on retaining a central position in Labor’s shadow ministry.

Above all, these divisions are driven by Washington’s insistence on an unconditional commitment to back the US in its escalating economic war and military confrontation with China, Australia’s largest export market.

Shorten is a known close backer of the US. He was a pivotal figure in the backroom removal of Rudd as prime minister in 2010. Rudd, while firmly backing the US military alliance, had suggested that Washington should make some accommodation to China’s economic rise. Shorten, along with several other key powerbrokers, orchestrated the installation of Gillard, who immediately signed up to the Obama administration’s military and strategic “pivot” to Asia to encircle China and agreed to base US Marines in the strategic northern city of Darwin.

As Albanese reiterated at last December’s Labor Party national conference, he is a “strong supporter of the US alliance.” However, doubts remain over his reliability because he opposed Rudd’s axing. Moreover, Albanese recently defended Keating’s dramatic election campaign intervention, in which the former prime minister declared that Australia’s intelligence chiefs were “nutters” who had gone “berko” in their hostile approach to Beijing.

Albanese said Keating’s remarks reflected “broader concerns.” This was a vague reference to the alarm in sections of the ruling class that an all-out economic war against China, let alone a military conflagration, would devastate the profits of the mining companies and other corporate giants that rely on the Chinese market, and also trigger working class opposition to a potentially catastrophic war.

As another check on Albanese—alongside Shorten—one of Labor’s most fervent pro-US figures, defence spokesman Richard Marles is set to be installed, also unopposed, as deputy leader when Labor’s parliamentary caucus meets on Thursday.

Marles, a “Right” faction boss, is best known for advocating, in 2016, that Australian warships and planes should conduct provocative “freedom of navigation” operations inside Chinese-claimed waters in the South China Sea.

In a speech to the US Studies Centre last November, Marles directly accused China of challenging the “global rules-based order,” which was established under US hegemony after World War II, and said the US alliance had to be “protected” now “more than ever before.”

Before being installed in parliament, both Albanese and Marles spent their entire adult lives as Labor careerists. Albanese was a ministerial research officer, then New South Wales Labor assistant general secretary and later a senior adviser to state premier Bob Carr. Marles was a union legal adviser, then Australian Council of Trade Unions assistant secretary for seven years.

After six years of self-proclaimed “unity” under Shorten following Labor’s landslide defeat in 2013, the party’s latest debacle has underscored the protracted decline in Labor’s previous base in the working class, and brought unresolved rifts to the surface. Albanese’s hold on the leadership will be fragile. Whatever the differences, however, Labor is totally committed to serving the interests of the Australian corporate elite, including by backing the aggressive US offensive against China.



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