

Australian Labor Party leader reinforces pro-business message by denouncing building union official

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Barely two weeks after he was installed as Labor Party leader, following the party's devastating May 18 election defeat, the corporate media has praised Anthony Albanese for suspending, and vowing to expel, construction trade union leader John Setka from the party.

Without any pretence of due process, Albanese seized on unsubstantiated reports—denied by Setka—that during an internal union executive meeting Setka made disparaging remarks about a campaigner for laws that purport to protect women from domestic violence.

Setka has not been accused of corruption or selling out his members. Instead, an orchestrated hue and cry has been launched throughout the media, accusing him of calling into question the work of Rosie Batty, who was made “Australian of the Year” in 2015 for campaigning against violence committed against women.

In an extraordinary television interview on Thursday night, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary Sally McManus said she had urged Setka to resign as Victorian state secretary of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU). She insisted that he should quit, even though he was “innocent” of making the reported comments.

McManus thus directly contradicted Albanese's allegation, but still declared that Setka had to go, because of “a whole range of issues” that she did not specify. In other words, Setka's alleged comments are a flimsy pretext to bring to a head previous plans to oust him as a union boss and Labor factional powerbroker.

Among the “range of issues,” highlighted by the media, are criminal charges against Setka of harassing a woman—charges to which he this week agreed to plead guilty.

As an elected official, Setka cannot be simply removed—the CFMMEU national leadership would have to lay charges against him in order to do so. Nevertheless, the drive to oust him is escalating.

For years, Setka has been falsely depicted in the media as a “militant.” In fact, he has worked closely with employers for three decades to suppress and contain the militancy of building workers, one of the most important sections of the working class. He has also corralled workers behind the thoroughly pro-business Labor Party.

Nevertheless, the ruling elite is demanding Setka's removal as a test for Albanese, the Labor Party and trade union bureaucrats of their readiness to block and attack any strikes or opposition by workers to defend their democratic and social rights. This is in response to a global resurgence of working-class struggles against worsening austerity, social inequality and militarism.

There are fears in ruling circles that the upsurge will erupt in Australia, particularly under conditions of economic slump, in which an estimated 70,000 construction workers have already lost their jobs in the property market crash since mid-2018.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review* on Wednesday, Phillip Coorey proclaimed: “In one move on Tuesday, Anthony Albanese asserted his authority over the Labor Party.” Albanese had “signaled a different culture to that under Bill Shorten,” his predecessor, a former union bureaucrat himself, who had relied heavily on the CFMMEU's factional backing.

On the same day, an editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* declared: “Anthony Albanese has finally done the right thing. After a build-up of public scorn and disgust, the Opposition Leader will move at the next meeting of the ALP's national executive to expel militant unionist John Setka.”

Significantly, the editorial cited comments by former prime minister and ACTU president Bob Hawke. In 2016, Hawke insisted that Labor had to outlaw the CFMMEU, just like his government deregistered the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in 1986. “You know what I did with the Builders Labourers Federation—I would throw them out,”

Hawke declared. The newspaper's editorial commented: "That's the ultimate test for our political leaders."

This is a clear warning of what lies behind the Setka affair. The Hawke government's unprecedented banning of a union was part of a wholesale assault on working-class conditions by the Labor Party and the ACTU through their prices and incomes Accords.

Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments worked hand in glove with the trade unions to cut real wages, demolish hard-won working conditions and break-up workplace shop committees. Labor and the unions imposed the greatest-ever transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich, as part of the program of economic restructuring carried out by governments around the world.

The target of the BLF deregistration was not the union's leaders, who included Setka. They subsequently integrated themselves into the CFMMEU. The ban was directed against builders' labourers—the most rebellious section of construction workers—and any genuine rank-and-file organisation on construction sites.

Setka's various "militant" stunts after 1986 sought to allow outraged building workers let off steam while channelling them back into the arms of the Building Workers Industrial Union, which later merged into the CFMMEU. The union cemented cosy relations with employers that opted to retain the services of the unions to help cut working conditions.

In 2012, for example, at the height of a much-publicised CFMMEU conflict with Grocon, a building company, Setka blurted out the union's pro-business attitude. "Everyone has realised the unions and builders have to work together," he told the *Herald Sun*, "why would we try to bite the hands that feeds us?"

Recent years, however, have seen the CFMMEU's membership shrink, like that of all the unions, precisely because of workers' hostility to its enforcement of anti-strike laws and the driving down of wages and conditions. In the construction industry, workplace deaths and injuries have worsened, despite the CFMMEU's claims to enforce safety standards, as highlighted by the death of 18-year-old apprentice Christopher Cassiniti in Sydney on April 1. Thirty-five construction workers were killed on the job in 2016, followed by 30 deaths in 2017.

Many employers no longer see the point of collaborating with the CFMMEU and other unions, which can impinge on their profits by demanding the employment of union officials as "safety" or "training" officers.

Notably, the same McManus who is demanding Setka's scalp warned last December's national Labor Party conference that a looming "tsunami" of working-class discontent would erupt unless a Labor government came to

office and pretended to address growing social inequality.

Labor's election defeat was an historic debacle. Not only did it lose to a far-right dominated Liberal-National Coalition, but Labor suffered its biggest losses in working-class areas. Its bogus promises of limited increases in social spending simply had no credibility. Many workers have not forgotten the attacks of Hawke and Keating, or how the anti-working class offensive deepened under the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013.

Labor's response, under Albanese, has been to commit itself to a more explicit right-wing and pro-big business program. Albanese immediately vowed to forge closer ties with business, boost "wealth creation" and pursue bipartisanship with the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

"Unions and employers have a common interest," Albanese said, echoing the "consensus" program of the Hawke and Keating governments. For their part, the unions will intensify their partnerships with employers accordingly, at the expense of the jobs and conditions of their members.

This week, the Morrison government exploited the Setka affair to declare its intent to reintroduce legislation to bolster powers to remove union officials and outlaw unions. Labor quickly signalled its readiness to back the move. Tony Burke, Labor's industrial relations spokesperson, said Labor would "look at" any new version of the bill, which Labor opposed in 2017.

The government's Ensuring Integrity Bill would enable the Federal Court to ban union leaders from holding office if they broke anti-strike laws, or failed to stop their members from doing so, or were deemed "not a fit and proper person." Unions could be deregistered if its members took "obstructive unprotected industrial action."

For now, Setka, who is refusing to quit as a union official, is supported by a number of CFMMEU, Maritime Union of Australia and Electrical Trades Union bureaucrats. Some officials, who were in the meeting at which Setka is alleged to have made his remarks, have accused Albanese of acting on the basis of "false allegations."

Whatever the factional warfare, however, Albanese and the Labor and ACTU leaders will pursue their attack, anxious to show they can pass their initial "test." This is just the first instalment. The wider "test" being demanded of them is to contain and suppress the "tsunami" of discontent in the working class.



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