

Australian Labor Party leader determined to expel building union official

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Despite his initial accusations being proven false, the Labor Party's recently-installed leader, Anthony Albanese, remains intent on expelling construction union leader John Setka from the party.

Albanese's original justification for demanding Setka's expulsion were leaked alleged remarks from a Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) national executive meeting criticising Rosie Batty, who was "Australian of the Year" in 2015 for campaigning against violence committed against women.

Even if Setka's comments had been accurately reported—and it is now clear they were not—Albanese's intervention is totally anti-democratic. It is effectively seeking to forbid any discussion that calls into question the official line of blaming "men" in general for domestic violence, or that cuts across the ruling establishment's agenda on any other issue.

Albanese's move has provoked splits in the trade union bureaucracy, accompanied by threats to end union donations, worth millions of dollars, to the Labor Party. He remains, however, determined to remove Setka.

That is because the corporate media has set Setka's removal as the first "test" of Albanese's leadership in shifting the party further to the right. Albanese has adopted an explicit pro-big business agenda of hailing "wealth creation," dropping the bogus election posturing of "fairness" that failed to prevent Labor's defeat in the May 18 poll.

The corporate media have already set two further "tests" of Albanese's leadership. One is for the Labor Party to back the Liberal-National government's proposed income tax cuts for the wealthiest layers of society. The other is to support the repeal of a very limited "medevac" bill that allows doctors to recommend the evacuation to Australia of severely-ill refugees detained on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

With his original pretext demolished, Albanese abruptly shifted his ground this week, citing Setka's much-publicised clashes with employers going back many years and saying they had not "reflected well on the Labor Party, or indeed on the trade union movement."

Such incidents have led to Setka being promoted in the media as a "militant." In fact, his often-theatrical stunts have always sought to contain and divert the intense discontent among construction workers over deteriorating working conditions, wages and safety, now compounded by the loss of 70,000 jobs over the past year.

Backing Albanese, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus and 13 national unions have demanded that Setka resign as a union official. McManus even admitted that Setka did not make the alleged remarks against Batty, but cited "a range of issues," including Setka's recent announcement that he will plead guilty to charges of harassing a woman via social media.

The rifts wracking the Labor and union bureaucracy intensified on Wednesday when the CFMMEU's national construction division declared its "full support" for Setka and condemned "untruthful leaks" from the union's national executive.

Officials from the Rail Tram and Bus Union, the Electrical Trades Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the plumbers' union and the United Firefighters Union also released statements supporting Setka.

These divisions have nothing to do with any defence of the rights of workers. Rather, they reveal fears that without phony "militant" rhetoric, the unions will be unable to continue suppressing the growing unrest in the working class over jobs, wages and soaring social inequality.

All these unions have enforced the offensive against working class conditions pursued by the corporate elite

and successive governments, since the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996. Every one of these unions signed up to the Hawke government's prices and incomes Accords, the Keating government's anti-strike "enterprise bargaining" laws, and the reinforcement of the unions' policing role by the 2007–2013 Labor governments through the "Fair Work" legislation.

For nearly four decades, Labor and the unions have systematically suppressed workers' struggles, and presided over the greatest-ever transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich. From apparatuses that contained the class struggle and propped up Australian capitalism by gaining limited concessions for workers within a nationally-regulated economy, the unions have become industrial policemen for tearing apart jobs, wages and conditions to satisfy the dictates of globally-mobile finance capital.

As a result, working-class support for Labor and the unions has steadily disintegrated. By last year, Labor's membership had fallen to 50,000, a decline of more than 6 percent since 2015. Union numbers had plummeted to under 10 percent of the private sector workforce. For workers aged under 25, the rate was just 5 percent. Before the Hawke government, union membership exceeded 50 percent.

Correspondingly, the unions have been transformed into some of the biggest businesses in the country, operating directly against workers' interests. Over the past 14 years their wealth in assets has trebled to nearly \$1.6 billion. The CFMMEU is one of the biggest financial entities. Its 2017 income, prior to the CFMEU merging with the Maritime Union of Australia, was greater than Fuji Xerox Asia Pacific. And the joint CFMMEU-employers' superannuation fund Cbus controls members' funds worth \$27 billion, making it one of the biggest investors in the building industry.

For the May 18 election, all the unions backed and financed—to the tune of more than \$12 million—the ACTU's fraudulent "Change the Rules" campaign. They sought unsuccessfully to convince workers to vote for another pro-business Labor government by promising that such a government would moderate Labor's own draconian "Fair Work" legislation. In reality, as the Socialist Equality Party warned throughout the election campaign, the "rule changes" were designed to bolster the repressive laws, to which the unions all agreed in 2009, and to intensify the collaboration between the unions and employers across entire industries.

The election was an historic debacle for both the Labor Party and its union partners. It was not just that Labor lost to a faction-riddled Liberal-National Coalition, increasingly dominated by the far-right. Labor suffered its biggest losses in working-class areas, like Sydney's western suburbs, the Hunter Valley and the central Queensland coalfields, previously regarded as "safe" Labor electoral strongholds. The fake Labor and union promises of limited increases in social spending had no credibility whatsoever, precisely because of the years of attacks by Labor governments on the living standards of workers.

In the wake of the crushing defeat, Setka and other union bureaucrats are trying to cover their tracks, and protect their fiefdoms, privileges and property investments, by retrospectively distancing themselves from the failed Labor-ACTU campaign. This is a cynical manoeuvre. Setka's branch of the CFMMEU has donated almost \$1 million of building workers' funds to the Labor party since 2012, and millions more to ACTU campaigns to back Labor.

This week, Setka said the moves against him were really triggered by his threat to withdraw such funding, uttered at that same meeting where he was accused of denigrating Batty. Setka told the *New Daily* that Labor's loss was a huge waste of money. "The \$12 million the ACTU spent, they might as well have gone down the racetrack and gone to the Crown casino and got a better return."

Workers' growing rejection of Labor and the unions cannot, by itself, resolve the political impasse confronting the working class. Workers should review the historical experiences with the Labor Party, make a conscious break from these pro-corporate apparatuses and their nationalist program, and turn to a socialist and international perspective. Only by unifying with workers globally in the struggle to overturn capitalism is it possible to mount a counter-offensive against the attacks being carried out by governments and corporations globally.



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