

# Factional wars and scandals wrack Australian Labor Party following election debacle

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Conflicts between trade union-based factional powerbrokers, interlaced with corruption scandals, have erupted within the Australian Labor Party (ALP) following its disastrous defeat in the May 18 federal election. The internal warfare is a further symptom of an historic crisis of the Labor and union apparatus.

In the course of the past week, the ALP has been wracked with turmoil. At a corruption inquiry in the state of New South Wales (NSW), evidence of large illegal cash donations to the party by a Chinese billionaire property developer triggered the suspension of the state secretary. In Western Australia (WA), nearly half the delegates at the party's state conference walked out during a speech by the Labor premier. In Queensland, union officials staged a protest by hundreds of building workers outside the state parliament demanding the resignation of Labor's deputy premier.

There is not an ounce of political principle involved in any these rifts. Rather, competing blocs are fighting over parliamentary seats, associated privileges and government contracts. At the same time, they are all trying to reverse the collapse of their electoral and industrial bases, even as they follow new party leader Anthony Albanese in explicitly backing big business and "wealth creation." Long gone is the electoral pretence of proposing "a fair go for working families."

Decades of betrayals of the working class, in which successive Labor governments and the unions have policed the corporate offensive on jobs, wages, working conditions, social services and basic rights, have come home to roost.

Not only did Labor lose what the corporate media had presented as an "unloseable" election against a widely detested Liberal-National Coalition. Labor's vote fell to its lowest level in a century—33.1 percent in the

lower house and 28.8 percent in the Senate. The results marked a new turning point in the disintegration of Labor's working-class base since the 1970s.

Labor's support dropped most sharply in working-class areas across the country that were once regarded as Labor heartlands while its vote rose in many affluent electorates. Some of the worst results were recorded in seats that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) had specifically targeted for close to two years to try to secure votes for Labor. The ACTU's "Change the Rules" campaign, to increase the power of the unions in imposing enterprise bargaining agreements on workers, was a debacle.

The extraordinary revelations of bags of cash being delivered to the NSW party's head office is bound up with a media witch-hunt against China, but also reflects the collapse of Labor's support. Some of the biggest election swings against Labor occurred in NSW, including in Sydney's working-class western suburbs. The federal result followed an equally devastating defeat in the March state election.

Across the other side of the continent, a speech by state Premier Mark McGowan to WA Labor's annual conference was overshadowed by a factional dispute. Just before McGowan was set to address the gathering, right-wing trade union bureaucrats and those from the construction and maritime unions walked out, shouting "shame" and "bulls—t." The premier delivered his televised keynote speech to a two-thirds empty room.

The nominally left-wing United Voice union, which props up McGowan's leadership, had earlier bureaucratically de-credentialled a delegate from the rival "Progressive Labor" faction. The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) accused the "chicken wing" of the party of excluding "a proud union delegate."

The next day, some delegates from “Progressive Labor,” which includes the right-wing-led retail industry union, refused to join a customary standing ovation for Albanese as the national party leader.

Rather than a policy difference with Albanese’s rightward pitch, this protest was directed against Albanese’s ongoing bid to expel Victorian state CFMMEU secretary John Setka from the party. By ousting Setka, who is falsely portrayed by the media as a construction industry “militant,” Albanese is seeking to prove to the ruling class that he has the capacity to enforce his pro-business policies, including against the building workers whose militancy Setka has long worked to contain.

On the second day of the WA conference, it took more than two hours to count votes for a CFMMEU-led motion to keep Fremantle Port operational for a further 14 years. The vote was narrowly defeated, thus rubberstamping the state Labor government’s pledge to build a more automated container port further south at Kwinana. Fremantle has been a power base of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which is now part of the CFMMEU.

In a ludicrous attempt to regain some credibility among workers, the factions combined to reinsert the party’s former “socialist objective” into the party platform. The WA branch ditched this phrase in 1999. The “objective” was always a fraud, advocating “the democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange,” not the overthrow of capitalist profit system. The Labor Party initially adopted it nationally in 1921 to head off working-class support for the 1917 Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia.

Today, the Labor and union bureaucracy again fears the development of a working-class movement outside their control, after long suppressing the opposition of workers to the ever-greater transfer of wealth to the financial elite—a process spearheaded by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments during the 1980s and 1990s.

Equally cynical manoeuvres surrounded the Queensland state conference, which was also held last weekend. Three days before the gathering, CFMMEU state secretary Michael Ravbar organised a rally of building workers to demand the resignation of Deputy Premier and Treasurer Jackie Trad. Several hundred

workers enthusiastically chanted “ALP’s full of sh-t.”

Trad is still waiting to hear if Queensland’s Crime and Corruption Commission will formally investigate her purchase of a potentially lucrative investment property along the route of the \$5.4 billion Cross River Rail project she has overseen in the state capital Brisbane. The CFMMEU bureaucracy’s real complaint, however, is that the government awarded the construction contract to an Italian-led consortium. The union leaders are demanding that sub-contracts now be handed to companies with which they cooperate.

Despite his demagogic calls for Trad’s scalp at the rally, Ravbar did not follow through on his threat to propose a motion against her at the party conference. Instead, after huddling with other “left” union officials, he moved a resolution to urge the state government to adhere to its own nationalist “Australian-made” procurement policies on the rail project.

Behind the posturing, all the factions backed the right-wing push by Albanese, supported by Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk, who both delivered keynote speeches. The conference duly endorsed a new party platform declaring support for the coal industry, regardless of its environmental damage. Palaszczuk hailed the mining industry for investing \$21 billion on 30 new projects in the state, including the proposed giant Adani coal mine.

Just days before the conference, Palaszczuk’s government underscored its determination to suppress opposition to such projects by announcing draconian anti-protest laws. The laws blatantly attack fundamental democratic rights, including free speech, free movement and freedom to associate.

There was no criticism of these measures at the conference, despite the government being exposed for attempting to justify the laws by falsely accusing environmental demonstrators of using deadly booby traps.



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