Australian Labor Party leader puts big business “first and foremost”

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In what was billed as his first major speech since being installed as Labor leader following its devastating May 18 federal election defeat, Anthony Albanese vowed that his party would be “first and foremost” in “the business of creating wealth.”

Albanese’s “vision” speech to a big business audience in Perth on Tuesday reinforced Labor’s commitment to satisfying their dictates at the expense of the working class. He declared that Labor would ensure that businesses “thrive and flourish,” including by restructuring the industrial relations system to enhance the so-called “gig economy” of casual and contract workers.

Officially, the Labor Party is awaiting an internal review into the election debacle, due shortly, but the outcome is already obvious. Albanese’s speech reiterated the further lurch to the right by the Labor Party, ditching its phony “fair go” rhetoric of the election campaign. As soon as he was elected unopposed as party leader, Albanese pledged to forge closer ties to business, boost “wealth creation” and appeal to “successful people.”

Albanese unequivocally adopted the mantle of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996. They responded to the globalisation of production by deregulating the economy, spearheading an assault on jobs and working conditions, and a vast redistribution of wealth from the working class to the financial elite over the past three decades.

“Like Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, I understand that building the future means we must first and foremost be in the business of creating wealth,” Albanese said. “Labor is proudly and resolutely pro-growth. We understand that successful businesses and vibrant economy are essential prerequisites for job growth.”

On May 18, many workers, based on decades of bitter experiences, did not believe Labor’s “fairness” populism, which promised to increase some wealth-based taxes in order to provide limited additional funds for deteriorating public schools, hospitals and social services. After years of Labor governments, from Hawke to Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, enforcing the requirements of the corporate ruling class, Labor could make no credible appeal to workers and young people.

Labor’s vote plunged to a century low of 33.1 percent, pointing to an historic political crisis. Labor’s support dropped most sharply in working class areas across the country, leaving it with virtually no “safe” seats. By contrast, its vote rose substantially in affluent electorates, reflecting its true appeal to the wealthy.

Rather than the election signalling a swing to the right by the electorate, as claimed by the corporate media, the Liberal-National Coalition also lost votes. It barely retained office, assisted by votes for One Nation and other far-right formations that primarily represented a misguided protest directed against the entire political establishment.

In his speech, Albanese accused Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government of not doing enough to boost corporate profits, despite its multi-billion dollar cuts to company and high-income taxes. Under conditions of a global slump and trade war, he called on the government to provide greater investment incentives and bring forward infrastructure spending.

Emulating Hawke and Keating, Albanese promised “forward-looking” industrial relations “reform” to produce a 21st century workforce, which would need to be “as flexible as the gig economy jobs” they would fill. He said Labor’s industrial relations spokesman, Tony Burke, was developing a new framework, including “portable entitlements,” supposedly because the casualisation of work could not be rolled back.

While Albanese paid lip service to giving casualised workers a “greater sense of security,” he emphasised that for employers, “non-standard arrangements” could help with spikes in demand for labour. In other words, Labor’s

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laws would make it even easier for employers to hire workers on "zero-hours contracts" and dump them when their labour is no longer profitable.

Albanese depicted the "gig economy" as a fait accompli, glossing over the role of governments, Labor and Coalition, aided by the trade unions, in imposing it. He said Australians had close to 1.5 million "secondary jobs," on which workers now depended to make ends meet. His example was instructive: 40 percent of Uber drivers had a separate full-time job or owned a business. "Many Uber drivers adopt the platform precisely for the flexibility it provides," he said. In reality, Uber drivers and most others in service or delivery jobs have little choice but to take such work because of low wages and high levels of unemployment and under-employment.

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

Far from opposing this stepped-up exploitation, the unions are fully on board. Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus immediately welcomed Albanese's announcement, claiming it would improve protections for "gig economy and casual workers."

Albanese further echoed Hawke and Keating by outlining a "genuine" tripartite union-government-business partnership along the lines of the Accords through which the unions ruthlessly policed the destruction of jobs and conditions during the 1980s and 1990s.

Albanese said a Labor government would establish Jobs and Skills Australia, a tripartite body, to ensure that employers could access plentiful supplies of the workers they wanted as technology advanced. He said Labor's vision was one of a society "that understands that unions and business have common goals."

To reassure the mining conglomerates, and head off avowedly pro-coal rivals within the Labor leadership, Albanese avoided any commitment to climate change emission-reduction targets. Instead, he claimed that a Labor government would secure the long-term future of coal mines by helping exports of coking coal to build wind turbines, as a means of "decarbonising" the economy. Such exports would be small compared to the millions of tonnes of thermal coal mined for power generation every year.

Albanese's speech was saturated with divisive nationalism, mirroring the trade unions in denouncing the government for issuing "half a million visas to foreign workers" over six years, supposedly robbing local workers of jobs.

Despite his pro-business offensive, Albanese faces potential challenges to his leadership. His first "vision" speech—two more are planned—followed a wave of media commentary by elements calling for an even greater alignment with the requirements of the ruling class. Among the voices were those of deputy leader Richard Marles and shadow finance minister Jim Chalmers.

Others Labor leaders expressed concern that the nakedness of the pro-corporate turn would deepen the disaffection among workers and young people. Senator Kim Carr, a rival "Left" faction powerbroker to Albanese, declared that the party had taken the correct policies to the May election. He said the "world has moved on" from the Hawke-Keating era and that "trying to be a poor man's Tony Blair is not going to be the answer for the Labor Party." Carr said social democratic parties "around the world" were suffering because they embraced "third way" politics and neo-liberalism.

The truth is that Albanese is displaying Labor's true colours. From its birth, the Labor Party has been steeped in nationalism and class collaborationism and committed to enforcing the profit and political requirements of the capitalist class. Its initial reformist program—seeking concessions within a nationally-regulated framework—gave way decades ago to reversing all the past gains of the working class in order to make Australian capitalism "globally competitive."

That is why support is collapsing for the Labor Party and its associated trade unions, just like their international counterparts. For now, this has opened the door for right-wing populists seeking to divert the disaffection in reactionary nationalist and anti-immigrant directions. However, as is taking place internationally, layers of youth and workers alienated from the entire political establishment are starting to look towards a socialist alternative as the answer to the depredations of capitalism.

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