

Australian Labor Party leader dodges state party conference

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Last weekend's Labor Party conference in the state of Victoria provided a display of the splintering and infighting wracking the Labor and trade union apparatus following Labor's disastrous defeat at the May 18 federal election.

The very fact that federal party leader Anthony Albanese felt he could not appear as the keynote speaker at the event—breaking a long tradition—spoke volumes about the political crisis gripping the party, which has been one of the mainstays of capitalist rule in Australia for a century.

About 200 of the 600 delegates, mostly associated with nominally “left” trade union-dominated factions, walked out of the conference in a show of protest against Albanese's replacement as the featured speaker, deputy federal leader Richard Marles.

The issue triggering the walkout was said to be opposition to the latest federal government “free trade” agreements, with Indonesia, Hong Kong and Peru, that the Labor Party leadership has agreed to support. That support flouts the party's platform, which opposes such agreements on reactionary protectionist and nationalist lines.

Clearly another motivating factor was Albanese's determination, backed by the entire Labor leadership, to expel Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) Victorian state secretary John Setka from the party.

Setka, who has now quit the party, accused Albanese of turning his back on workers by refusing to attend the conference. “He says he supports the working class yet he doesn't have the decency to show up and face the workers' reps at the ALP state conference in Victoria,” Setka tweeted.

Setka's posturing as a workers' champion by Setka is completely bogus. He and the CFMMEU machine have striven for decades to suppress the militancy of building workers and miners, while organising occasional stunts in order to cement partnerships with selected employers. Nevertheless, Setka's expulsion from the Labor Party was designated as a “test” by the media of Albanese's commitment to a more naked pro-big business program in response to the election debacle.

Beyond the rifts over “free trade” deals and Setka, Albanese's refusal to attend reflects underlying concerns throughout the Labor and union bureaucracy about the widespread hostility in the working class. Particularly since the 1980s, Labor and the unions have been instrumental in imposing the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions dictated by the financial elite.

Since being elected unopposed as party leader following the election defeat, Albanese has insisted that Labor must openly embrace big business, advocate “wealth creation” and seek bipartisanship with the right-wing Liberal-National Coalition government. The fear among sections of the party is that this unabashed support for big business and the wealthy will precipitate a further break-up of its former working class base of support.

The May 18 election was a double blow to Labor politicians and union bureaucrats. They were anticipating being hoisted back into office, with all the associated perks and privileges. The media tipped them to win the “unloseable” election because of broad antipathy toward the Coalition government. Instead, despite the Coalition's vote falling, Labor's vote dropped to its lowest level in a century—33.1 percent in the lower house and 28.8 percent in the Senate.

These results marked a new turning point in the protracted disintegration of Labor's working-class base since the 1980s. The party's own official review of the result, released this month, confirmed that the biggest losses came in working-class electorates across the country, particularly in outer suburban and regional areas, while its vote rose in wealthier electorates.

Contrary to the mythology advanced by the mainstream media, the swing away from Labor was not only concentrated in the northern state of Queensland and some coal mining regions, such as the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. Some of the biggest shifts occurred in working-class suburbs of Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, long regarded as a Labor Party stronghold.

Polling booth statistics revealed that Labor's vote fell by

up to 18.7 percentage points in outer western and northern Melbourne suburbs, such as Delahey (18.7 points), Craigieburn and Sunshine North (18.6), Melton South (17.2), Albanvale (16.4), Cairnlea (15.9) and South Morang (15.5). These results were similar to those in working class suburbs of western Sydney and Brisbane as well as parts of regional Queensland and the Hunter Valley.

Labor's review cited studies that concluded that "the Queensland-only swing was not significant when controlling for various demographic indicators." The review continued: "The average swing to Labor in 2019 in the 20 seats with the highest representation of university graduates was +3.78 percent. This contrasts with an average swing of -4.22 percent against Labor in the 20 seats with the lowest representation of university graduates." (The proportion of university graduates is regarded as an indicator of income and wealth.)

Not one Labor or union leader, including the delegates who walked out against Marles, have raised any difference with Albanese's pitch to the corporate elite. Labor's review—accepted by all of them—concluded that the party must drop its election pretence of championing a "fair go" for workers against the wealthy elite. It insisted that the party must "abandon divisive rhetoric, including references to 'the big end of town'."

In reality, it was not Labor's phony "fairness" promises that alienated working class voters. Rather, many drew the conclusion, drawn from years of bitter betrayals at the hands of Labor governments and the unions, that such pledges were a fraud. For similar reasons, Labor Party and union membership has collapsed, with the unions now covering less than 14 percent of the workforce, compared to 51 percent in 1976.

Moreover, the gulf between working class people and the wealthy has widened dramatically over the same period—to such an extent that the Albanese-led party has concluded that it is too "divisive" to mention.

At the weekend conference, Marles referred to the turmoil gripping the party, saying there had been "a lot of grief, a lot of soul-searching" since May 18. Without dissent, he hailed the party's election review, declaring: "It gave us the answers to the questions about what went wrong and it contains within it the lessons that we must learn going forwards."

Significantly, in Albanese's absence, Marles paid tribute to Bill Shorten, the longtime union boss who led Labor to the May 18 defeat. Shorten, he said, had led "our movement wonderfully." To cheers from the audience, Marles declared: "We all owe Bill an enormous debt of gratitude."

Shorten, who has pledged to remain in politics for 20 years, received a standing ovation. He defended his record,

denied the depth of the election defeat, and declared: "What we need to do between now and the election, every day is fight, fight and fight." Shorten is a life-long Labor and union apparatchik, with close associations with Washington and Labor's unconditional backing for the US military alliance.

The Labor and union leadership fears that a revolt in the working class, as is happening around the world, from Lebanon and Iraq to Chile, will hasten the breakup of their party. The party's election review noted that social democratic formations internationally are suffering similar fates. "The Socialist Party of France and the SPD in Germany, like the Australian Labor Party, have traditional associations with a working-class constituency," it said. "These two progressive, European parties have suffered an unprecedented loss of support."

What the review did not explain, of course, is why this is happening. With the development of globally-integrated production from the 1970s, Labor and other social democratic parties took their nationalist and pro-capitalist programs to their logical conclusion. They became the most ruthless enforcer of the commands of the corporate elite to ensure that "their" capitalist economies remained globally-competitive, at the expense of workers' conditions.

Beginning in 1983, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments pioneered the imposition of the agenda of international finance in Australia, deregulating the economy, and together with the unions, enforced the destruction of swathes of manufacturing.

The concerted attacks by Labor governments and the trade unions on jobs, conditions and essential social services over decades has generated widespread anger and disgust in the working class, but this is not enough. It is time to draw the necessary conclusion and to turn to a socialist alternative to the capitalist program of Labor and the political establishment as a whole.



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