

Australian Labor Party closes ranks with Morrison government in bushfire crisis

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The ongoing Australian bushfire crisis, which has so far claimed at least 28 lives, destroyed more than 2,600 homes and devastated millions of hectares of bush and pastoral land, has revealed the immense gulf between the vast mass of working people and the establishment political parties and institutions, all of which are beholden to the profit interests of a minuscule financial and corporate elite.

The Liberal-National Coalition government responded to the crisis with unconcealed indifference. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has become a central target of popular anger, after taking a secret holiday to Hawaii as the country burned. His government has since initiated a desperate campaign of damage control, announcing a series of inadequate funding promises.

The bushfires have revealed the political weakness of the Coalition government, which barely scraped into office in a federal election last May that was characterised by a mass repudiation of all the official parties.

Under conditions of the government's first serious political crisis since the election, the opposition Labor Party has stepped forward to try to dampen down popular anger. Labor, one of Australian ruling elite's primary political instruments, is no less fearful than the Coalition that the fires could become the focal point for mass social and political struggles directed against the entire parliamentary set-up.

Throughout the fire disaster, which has been unprecedented in scale and duration, Labor leader Anthony Albanese has limited his public remarks to the most tepid criticism of the government. He has stated that Labor is concerned, above all, with ensuring "national unity"—a codeword for preventing the eruption of the immense social opposition revealed by the fire crisis.

In early November, Albanese told a press conference in the northern New South Wales town of Nimbin that it was "not the time to engage in party politics." He declared: "This isn't a party political point here, this is people trying to do their best. I'm not seeking to politicise this at all."

His comments provoked at least one local resident to shout "shame on you" at the Labor leader, over his refusal to say anything about the inadequate government response to the fires.

On December 20, at the height of popular anger over Morrison's secret holiday, Albanese told commercial radio that he would not "make further comment while the crisis is ongoing." He stated: "I've had some criticism for not attacking the prime minister, but I just think politicians yelling at each other is not what's needed at the moment."

Albanese offered the government a life-line at the beginning of the year, proposing a meeting between the federal government and Labor opposition, and the state and territory governments. This was aimed at blunting widespread denunciations of the Morrison government for failing to develop any cohesive national plan for tackling the crisis.

While the government rejected the proposal, Labor has remained muted. Earlier this month, Albanese said the lack of federal action prior to January was a "mistake."

The Labor leader and senior parliamentarians have sought to outflank the government from the right, condemning it only for taking too long to mobilise the military. As the WSWs has warned, the use of the armed services in the bushfire crisis is an indication that authoritarian measures will be deployed in every situation when the ruling elite faces social unrest.

Labor MPs have said nothing also about the fact that

the use of the defence force demonstrates that firefighting and relief organisations have been gutted and underfunded by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, at the state and federal levels.

Labor's response is in line with its attempts to present itself to big business as the party most capable of advancing the corporate elite's interests and ensuring "stability."

Labor ascribed its May federal election defeat to former leader Bill Shorten's tepid populist rhetoric, which included demagogic denunciations of the "big end of town" and vague promises to increase social spending. In reality, Labor's vote collapsed because after decades of imposing the dictates of big business, millions of workers and youth viewed its election pledges as lies that would do nothing to improve the lives of ordinary people.

Labor has responded to its defeat by shifting even further to the right. Albanese, who was installed unopposed after the election, declared an end to "class war rhetoric" and insisted on the need to "promote growth" in collaboration with big business. This is a clear signal that a Labor government would intensify the assault on public spending, in line with the dictates of the banks and corporations.

As part of this pitch, Albanese has rejected calls for decreases in coal production, which is one of Australia's largest exports. Taking a line identical to that of the Coalition, he declared in December that to "immediately stop exporting coal would damage our economy." Coal is a major contributor to carbon emissions, which are driving global climate change and a key factor in the severity of the current bushfires. The Queensland state Labor government has similarly rejected calls to block the new Adani coal mine in the centre of the state.

Similarly, Labor has done nothing to reverse climate change when it has been in federal office. In 2012, the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard introduced a carbon tax that was touted by its proponents as a major step in tackling global warming. In reality, under the government's own modelling, carbon emissions were set to increase under the measure. Labor also has promoted various international summits, at which governments make marginal emission reduction pledges that they are free to violate

at will.

Labor governments, like their Coalition counterparts, have failed to develop a cohesive response to disasters such as bushfires. Instead, they have implemented decades of cuts to healthcare, welfare, education and other social services, creating a social crisis that is greatly intensifying the hardship caused by the fires.

Labor governments have presided over woefully inadequate responses to fire and flooding crises in the recent past. The party was in office at the state and federal level in 2009, when Black Saturday fires in Victoria claimed the lives of 173 people.

Testimony later made clear that the damage wrought by the fire was exacerbated by the shambolic official response of the state Labor government. Victims of the blaze who survived were left to the predations of the insurance companies and were largely abandoned.

In 2011, the state and federal Labor governments' response to a flooding crisis in Queensland was similar to Morrison's handling of the current fires. Labor effectively placed the military in charge of emergency relief, in a bid to intimidate widespread anger. It stonewalled calls for an examination of why little had been done to prepare for the disaster and greenlighted the refusal of the insurance companies to make whole those who had lost everything.

The record underscores the fact that Labor, no less than the Coalition, is a party of big business, hostile to the interests of working people.



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