

Pandemic accelerates union-government-employer collaboration in Australia

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This week, as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened globally and in Australia, the trade unions and the Labor Party took decades of intensifying partnership with big business to new heights.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison expressed his gratitude to Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus personally at a media conference on Thursday for her collaboration with his government.

“I spoke to Sally McManus again this morning and I want to thank her for her engagement in what is a very difficult time,” Morrison said.

It is no accident that McManus, who once postured as a militant, is now being feted by the corporate media as a “star” of the deepening coronavirus crisis, along with former ACTU chief and Labor Party cabinet minister Greg Combet.

Together with key big business representatives, McManus and Combet are the joint architects of most of the huge corporate bailout measures that Morrison announced this week.

Morrison’s gratitude indicates how much his detested and distrusted Liberal-National Coalition government depends on the unions to stifle the unrest in the working class over mass unemployment, cuts to wages and conditions, and exposure to dangerously unprotected conditions in workplaces.

The prime minister praised McManus for working with Christian Porter, his attorney-general and industrial relations minister, to orchestrate union-employer deals to slash workers’ wages and conditions in one industry after another. Revealingly Porter had earlier described McManus as his BFF [“best friend forever”].

After thanking McManus, Morrison declared: “There are no blue teams or red teams, there are no more unions or bosses, there are just Australians now, that’s all that matters, an Australian national interest and all Australians working together.”

There is no such thing as “all Australians working together.” As the pandemic has revealed, there are the irreconcilably opposed interests: those of the ruling class to

exploit the crisis to radically restructure jobs and conditions and to get as many workers working as possible even in unsafe conditions, and those of the working class for safe work places, secure incomes whether working or not, and a dramatic boosting of health services to counter the virus.

The vast bulk of the stimulus packages have been to prop up the profits of businesses with no indication that the wages subsidies and other measures will result in jobs being saved.

The role of the unions is no aberration. For many years they have been the chief enforcers of the profit demands of corporate Australia, at the expense of workers, particularly since the union-employer-government prices and incomes Accords imposed by the ACTU and the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Working hand-in-glove with employers and governments, the unions have suppressed workers’ struggles for four decades, enabling a vast transfer of wealth to the financial elite and thus producing staggering social inequality.

Now, in response to the greatest breakdown of the capitalist profit system since the two world wars and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the unions are helping employers to inflict far deeper attacks on workers that are intended to be permanent, long past the end of the pandemic.

Desperate to try to save off a depression and prevent a social explosion, the Coalition government this week unveiled multiple packages worth hundreds of billions of dollars to prop up companies. Under the fraudulent banners of “saving jobs,” “acquiring more hospital beds” and “free child care,” these include outright wage subsidies for big business and “viability” packages to rescue the private hospital conglomerates, such as Bupa and Ramsay Health, and childcare chains like the share market-listed G8 Education.

Instead of being bailed out, these essential services should be expropriated and placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, along with the banks and all basic industries, in order to urgently protect working-class lives and livelihoods.

Having helped to design the bailout packages, the ACTU

rushed to impose on workers industry deals to cut pay and conditions so that employers could fully exploit the handouts and herd as many of their employees back to work as possible, regardless of the dangers of exposure to COVID-19.

Without the slightest consultation with workers, for example, unions and industry groups signed an agreement for hospitality businesses to rip up awards and enterprise agreements so they can reduce employee hours and put staff on leave at half-pay with 24 hours' notice.

In the manufacturing sector, Ai Group CEO Innes Willox, representing the employers, and Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary Daniel Walton issued a joint statement insisting it was "crucial" that factories keep their operations running, even in non-essential industries and even if "social distancing guidelines" are violated.

Similar joint declarations were issued by the AWU, the Construction Forestry Mining Maritime Union (CFMMEU) and the employers to cover the mining and construction sites, while paying meaningless lip service to trying to ensure that the "safety and well-being" of workers "is not compromised."

All the wage-cutting and "labour flexibility" agreements are presented as "temporary" measures to "save jobs." But the government and employers are already saying that the emergency has created the opportunity to set the benchmarks for the future.

Industrial Relations Minister Porter on Thursday praised unions and employer groups for working "co-operatively and quietly" on workplace changes. "It probably is fair to say that there has been the type of change in three weeks inside the award system that you might otherwise wait 30 years to see," he said.

Former Business Council of Australia chairman Tony Shepherd told the *Weekend Australian*: "Fighting COVID-19 is a wake-up call and an opportunity to rekindle productivity, investment, industrial relations and federal-state co-operation to improve the lives of Australians... It is a terrible opportunity, but we must grasp this if we are to have any hope of coming out of this successfully."

A major employer group, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, told the federal government's Fair Work Commission it should consider cutting the minimum wage if the coronavirus crisis worsens, referring to the 10 percent reduction in award wages during the Great Depression.

Likewise, media outlets are insisting that the huge subsidies for big business, now exceeding half the entire annual federal government budget of \$500 billion, must be clawed back by cutting social spending and working conditions. A nervous editorial in the *Weekend Australian*

accepted that the government's measures were necessary, for now, because of intensifying social and political discontent.

"Voter trust in our democracy has plummeted during a dysfunctional decade of hyper-partisanship, internal party disorder, obsession with niche rights and legislative gridlock," the editorial warned.

"COVID-19 and its aftermath of high debt, social anxiety, and economic fragility will demand the political class turn its attention to basic problem-solving and long-term preparedness—on national security, vital infrastructure, manufacturing capability, sustainability and prosperity."

Above all, this meant "taking the shackles off all our companies—reducing taxes, red tape and workplace restrictions."

None of this would be possible without the Labor Party propping up the Morrison government. Labor holds the majority in the "national cabinet" of federal, state and territory leaders that has become a de facto "wartime" regime, ruling by decrees.

Having agreed to shut down parliament for months to facilitate executive rule, federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese and his shadow ministers are holding weekly teleconferences with their government counterparts to ensure a united front. Next Wednesday they will help the government push its \$130 billion wage subsidy for employers through a one-day "emergency" sitting of parliament, just as they did last month for the government's earlier business "stimulus" and "rescue" packages.

Speaking on Sky News yesterday, Albanese credited the government with implementing measures that were "really working" and vowed that he and his party would continue to be "as constructive as possible."

Once again, even more so than following the global economic breakdown of 2008–09, the working class faces being made to pay for the utter failure of the corporate profit-driven market system. Workers must begin to take matters into their own hands by organising their own democratically-elected rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the trade unions, to fight for their class interests.

The measures being taken to rescue capitalism via massive state handouts and interventions demonstrate the concrete necessity for the complete reorganisation of economic and social life along socialist lines, that is, on the basis of human need, not private profit and wealth accumulation.



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