

Australian unions tell employers: “You can get everything you want”

Mike Head
7 April 2020

A featured appearance by Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship “Insiders” television show last Sunday was extremely revealing.

McManus’s interview indicates how much the ruling elite depends on the trade unions to quash unrest in the working class over the mass unemployment, cuts to wages and conditions, and exposure to dangerously unprotected conditions in workplaces produced by the corporate and government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The head of the union movement said the unions were telling employers: “You can get everything you want through co-operation and by doing it through the way that we’ve already demonstrated that we can.”

This pledge was given in the immediate context of assuring big business that the unions would continue to help slash the working hours, wage penalty rates and leave entitlements of millions of workers as part of the Liberal-National Coalition government’s fraudulently named “Jobkeeper” wage subsidy program.

Under the program, with the agreement of the ACTU, employers will be free to cut the wages of workers to the pitiful level of the \$1,500-a-fortnight government subsidy, including by reducing their working hours or forcing them to use up their leave entitlements.

But McManus’s message was clearly a wider one: beyond the coronavirus crisis, the unions will seek to impose on workers whatever the capitalist class demands to renew its profit and wealth accumulation under conditions of what will be a protracted global economic breakdown.

This collaboration takes to a more naked level the partnership forged for decades between the unions, employers and government to suppress the opposition of workers to the endless attacks of the financial elite, which have produced a soaring gulf between the super-rich and the working class.

McManus boasted that she had worked to make “changes” to industrial awards and agreements affecting 2.5 million restaurant, hospitality and clerical workers in “about a

week.” This proved that the required outcomes could “happen by cooperation, not by legislation.”

Typical of these “changes”—made without any consultation with these millions of workers—is the deal struck by the Australian Services Union (ASU). It allows employers to force 1.3 million clerical workers to work any hours from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. from Mondays to Fridays, and 7 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on Saturdays without overtime rates.

The ASU agreement with the employers also reduces minimum hours of permanent and casual staff, permits work across classifications, and lets employers direct workers to take leave. Casuals can be allocated shifts as short as two hours.

Rubber stamped by the federal government’s Fair Work Commission (headed by ex-ACTU assistant secretary Iain Ross), the deal shreds the conditions of payroll staff, receptionists, help desk workers and other administrative employees, who make up more than 10 percent of Australia’s workforce.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government is insisting that such drastic cuts to workers’ conditions must be extended to all industries and be cemented in the Fair Work Act. Its proposed legislation will override 121 awards, about 11,000 enterprise agreements and 4 million individual employment contracts.

Last night, McManus struck a deal with Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter for the unions to back the legislation, supposedly on the basis that unions, via the Fair Work Commission, could lodge appeals in some individual instances.

As that deal confirms, McManus and the union bureaucrats have no difference whatsoever with satisfying the dictates of the employers. However, they want to preserve their function as the industrial police of the working class, intensifying the role they have played for many decades.

In this, they stand with the Labor Party, which has pledged to help the Coalition government push the “Jobkeeper” legislation through a one-day sitting of a rump parliament tomorrow.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese wrote in an op-ed column in yesterday's *Australian* that his party was "yet to be convinced that changes to the Fair Work Act are necessary," but "I am sure with goodwill these issues can be worked through."

Albanese repeated his insistence that "throughout this crisis, the Labor Party has taken a constructive approach" of assisting the government. "We must carry our nation through this crisis swiftly, minimising the health impact so we can get businesses running and Australians back to work."

In other words, no less than Morrison's government, Labor is intent on pushing workers back to work soon, even though officially-confirmed COVID-19 infections and deaths are still rising, and the lack of testing, even for people with coronavirus symptoms, means that the danger of infection is even higher.

With the unions, the Labor Party has joined what is effectively a national unity government with the Coalition, resembling those formed in both world wars. Albanese and his key shadow ministers are meeting with their government counterparts each week, behind closed doors, and the state and territory Labor leaders hold a majority on the "national cabinet" that is running the country by decree.

The cuts to pay and conditions embraced by Labor and the ACTU will not be temporary. They will set precedents and benchmarks for indefinite use as capitalism lurches deeper into slump globally and in Australia.

The state Labor government in Queensland last week set the pace by revoking the small annual wage rises of 2.5 to 3 percent it had previously agreed to grant public sector workers.

The wage subsidy plan is a desperate bid to avert a social explosion. After rejecting calls for such a scheme for weeks, the government feared the popular outrage triggered when Great Depression-style jobless queues formed outside its welfare benefit offices two weeks ago.

According to the journalists on last Sunday's "Insiders" panel, government ministers nervously joked that they had become "socialists" and "communists" to deal with the economic and political crisis. There was even greater concern about the discontent that would erupt once the government began to "snap back" its handouts and unveil measures to pay off the resulting government debt of hundreds of billions of dollars.

The major employer groups demanded the wage subsidy, which was then designed and facilitated by McManus and former ACTU secretary and Labor cabinet minister Greg Combet, who sits on the government's COVID-19 taskforce.

For the short term, the scheme may prevent a sudden rise

in the official unemployment rate to the levels of near 20 percent predicted by corporate analysts. Westpac bank chief economist Bill Evans now forecasts a doubling of the official rate to almost 10 percent.

In reality, the \$130 billion scheme guarantees absolutely nothing in terms of jobs. Instead, it is a giant handout to enable companies to extract superprofits from the labour power of their employees.

Employers will not start receiving the wage subsidies until next month. Whether they decide to exploit the scheme or not will depend entirely on their profit calculations. The plan also excludes about 1.1 million casual workers and more than a million workers on temporary visas.

Most of the funds will go to the largest corporations, such as the construction, mining, logistics and manufacturing firms that are keeping their workforces on the job, often in unsafe workplaces that are exempted from "social distancing" rules.

The role of McManus and Albanese is not an individual issue. Labor and the unions have always enforced the profit demands of the Australian ruling elite, and that function was taken to a new level by the union-employer-government Accords imposed by the ACTU and the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

This historic record, now reaching new heights, shows the necessity for the working class to take control of the worsening catastrophe. Workers must demand urgent measures, such as full income support for all the working people who have lost their jobs, and safe conditions for all essential workers.

These requirements mean ending the control of economic life by the capitalist class. The shocking mass deaths being witnessed across Europe and the US, and which are threatened globally, including in Australia, show the need for real socialism, that is, workers' governments that will place the banks and basic industries under public ownership and democratic working class control to reorganise production for human need, not private profit.



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