

Labor and the unions help push corporate bailout through Australian parliament

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During a one-day rump sitting of Australia's parliament yesterday, the Labor Party joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition government to push through an unprecedented rescue package for the capitalist class, at the direct expense of millions of workers.

Within just over 12 hours, four far-reaching bills were rubberstamped by a bare quorum in both houses. The main thrust of these provisions is to allow employers to cut wages, working hours and other working conditions under the \$130 billion wage subsidy scheme unveiled by the government last week.

Employers can now change workers' hours to whatever amount would bring their pro-rata pay down to \$1,500 per fortnight, the amount provided by the government, on the basis that COVID-19 means there is less work for them.

In the words of the bills' official explanatory memorandum, a new Part 6-4C into the Fair Work Act now allows employers to issue "JobKeeper enabling directions." These can impose "increased flexibility around employees' hours of work via a new JobKeeper enabling stand down direction, performance of duties and location of work."

These measures demonstrate that the so-called "Jobseeker" package has nothing to do with saving jobs. Its primary purpose is to slash wages and eliminate basic protections for workers, while artificially lowering the official unemployment rate.

Over the next six months, the government will pay much of the wages bills of big business, without any guarantee that any of the millions of jobs already wiped out will be restored.

At the same time, the scheme enables employers to push some workers back into workplaces under unsafe conditions, even as the global pandemic worsens and

the number of officially-reported cases in Australia climbs past 6,000, with more than 50 deaths.

As a supposed safeguard for workers, the federal government's Fair Work Commission, an industrial court, "will be able to resolve disputes, including by arbitration."

The passage of the bills highlights the government's dependence on the trade unions and Labor Party to suppress working-class opposition to this assault.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus struck a deal to support the bills with Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter after backroom talks on Monday night.

McManus, whom Porter describes as his BFF ("best friend forever") readily abandoned her earlier posturing of concern over allowing the cuts to wages and conditions to be imposed, across-the-board, via the Fair Work Act.

McManus claimed the resulting package was an "historic win for working people" and thanked Porter for his engagement with the unions.

In reality, McManus's deal with Porter delivered on her pledge on national television last Sunday, when she assured the employers that "you can get everything you want through co-operation" with the unions.

This "co-operation" will now take the form of the unions diverting workers' opposition into individual appeals to the industrial court, as they have done for decades.

Following McManus's deal with Porter, Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese confirmed his party's commitment to vote for the bill, reiterating Labor's pledge of "constructive" support for the government throughout the coronavirus crisis.

Like McManus, Albanese agreed to help rush the bills through, even though they exclude about 1.1

million casual workers who worked for an employer for less than 12 months, 1.1 million overseas workers on temporary visas and hundreds of thousands of international students who worked part-time. The bills also exclude workers laid off by universities and local councils.

These workers will be left to try to subsist on poverty-level unemployment benefits, while the overseas workers and students have been denied any welfare support at all. Government ministers declared that these international workers and students should “go home” if they cannot support themselves financially. However, travel restrictions make that virtually impossible.

To make a show of “opposition,” Labor moved amendments in the lower house to include some of those workers, along with support packages for universities, disability support services and the arts. It did so cynically, knowing the government had the numbers to defeat the amendments.

Labor then expedited the legislation through the Senate where the government does not have the numbers. As it had promised the government, Labor did not move or support any amendments in the upper house and blocked with the government to bulldoze the bills though last night as swiftly as possible.

This is by far the biggest corporate bailout in Australian history. The \$130 billion allocated for the wage subsidy is more than the annual federal budgets for education and health combined. The bills also hand more than \$1 billion to private child care operators.

During the past month, the federal, state and territory governments, and the Reserve Bank of Australia, have now provided the financial elite with more than \$325 billion in tax concessions, subsidies, grants and loans. This dwarfs the totally inadequate sums allocated for the chronically-underfunded public health facilities and the mass testing urgently needed to combat the coronavirus.

Nurses, doctors, paramedics and other frontline workers are being left to confront the rising numbers of infections and deaths without sufficient masks, gowns and other personal protection equipment. Similar dangers face teachers, childcare workers, supermarket staff, construction workers, miners and postal and warehouse workers.

While the bills have six-month end-dates, the cuts to wages and conditions will not be temporary. As soon as

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government moves to “snap back” the government’s coronavirus measures, as it has vowed to do, Labor and the unions will just as quickly agree that the pay and conditions benchmarks set during the pandemic must continue in order to facilitate a “recovery” from the depression into which Australian and global capitalism is now descending.

Governments, both federal and state, Labor and Coalition alike, also will demand that the billions of dollars laid out for big business must be clawed back from the working class by way of deeper cuts to social spending, reduced pay and conditions and new waves of privatisations and asset sales.

Fearful of social unrest, Morrison’s government has formed a de facto power-sharing coalition regime with the Labor Party and the unions. Labor holds a majority in his “national cabinet” of state and territory government leaders who effectively rule the country by issuing decrees, with the federal and state parliaments mostly shut down. Albanese and his key shadow ministers also meet weekly with their Coalition counterparts, behind closed doors, to help devise and impose the government’s measures.

This united front shows the need for workers to take matters into their own hands, independent of the unions. This means demanding urgently-needed measures, such as full income support for all the working people, including casuals and temporary visa holders, who have lost their jobs or refuse to work in unprotected workplaces, and safe conditions for all essential workers.

These demands raise the need to reorganise economic and social life along socialist lines, on the basis of human need, not private profit. Instead of big business and the banks being propped up, they should be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control in order to produce and marshal the resources needed to protect the population’s health.



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