

COVID-19 and the role of Labor and the unions in Australia

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In the global coronavirus pandemic, workers and young people in Australia, as in every country around the world, confront crucial political issues amid the worsening health, economic and social disaster.

In fighting against mass unemployment, financial ruin and the danger to their very health and lives in many workplaces, the chief political obstacle confronting the working class is the Labor Party and the trade unions.

It is not only employers and the Liberal National Coalition government that are pressing for workers to return to work in unsafe conditions, but the Labor and the union bureaucracy. They are working hand-in-glove with Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his ministers, including to provide billions to employers and banks that workers will inevitably be forced to pay for.

Working people are watching with shock, revulsion and growing outrage the scenes of mass deaths across the US, UK and continental Europe produced by the contemptuous indifference and profit-driven responses of the governments in these world capitalist headquarters.

Despite premature and misleading claims about “flattening the curve” of infection, workers know that similar scenes could rapidly emerge across Australia. That danger is shown by the COVID-19 outbreaks in places such as Tasmanian hospitals, Victorian healthcare services and western Sydney aged care and disability facilities.

This pandemic is an indictment of the failure of the capitalist system, which subordinates everything, including human life, to the profit requirements of the financial elite.

But Labor and the unions are intent on shoring up this rapacious social order at all costs, including by helping employers slash jobs, wages and conditions during the pandemic and beyond.

That was spelt out in no uncertain terms when Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Secretary Sally McManus went on national television on April 5 to promise employers that, in terms of cutting pay and conditions, “you can get everything you want through cooperation” with the unions.

The Labor Party has formed a virtual power-sharing

regime with the Morrison government. Labor leader Anthony Albanese and his shadow ministers meet weekly with their government counterparts, behind closed doors, to help devise the governments’ measures.

Labor also holds a majority in Morrison’s “national cabinet” of state and territory government leaders, who effectively rule the country by decree, exercising vast emergency powers.

In just one month, with the full support of Labor and the ACTU, Morrison’s government has provided big business with more than \$325 billion in tax concessions, subsidies, grants and loans. This dwarfs the totally inadequate sums allocated for the public health facilities and mass testing urgently needed to combat the coronavirus.

The ruling class will demand that every cent be clawed back from the working class by way of deeper cuts to social spending, increased tax, reduced pay and conditions and further privatisations and asset sales.

Fearing widespread social unrest, it needs Labor and the unions to try to suppress the developing opposition in the working class, including among teachers, child care workers and building workers.

In order to defend their lives, livelihoods and futures, workers and youth will have to wage a political struggle against the Labor and union apparatus. That means soberly reviewing the history of the Labor Party and drawing the necessary political lessons.

Already there is widespread hostility to the Labor Party and unions as a result of decades of betrayals, particularly since the union-employer-government Accords of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Union membership has shrunk to less than 10 percent of private sector workers. Among young workers, aged under 25, the rate is just 5 percent.

Labor’s electoral support base also has collapsed. At the federal election last May, its vote plunged to 33 percent—its lowest level in a century—even though the Coalition’s vote dropped as well. For good reason, millions of workers

simply did not believe Labor's phony promises to secure a "fair go" from the wealthy elite.

But anger and disgust are not enough. Those who cast a protest vote to try to pressure Labor to mend its ways will be bitterly disappointed. Its only response to the election debacle was to shift sharply further to the right, led by Albanese, who pledged to boost "wealth creation" and appeal to "successful people."

Now it is in the forefront of propping up the capitalist system even as workers are becoming aware that it places profit ahead of all else, including the health, well-being and lives of the population, and are beginning to consider a socialist alternative.

It is not simply a question of corrupt or poor Labor and union leaders, but rather the entire perspective of Laborism.

From its birth, formed by the unions in the 1890s, Labor was committed to the defence of the Australian capitalist nation state, providing its founding racist ideology of "White Australia."

Labor leaders have always insisted that it was not necessary to overthrow capitalism as the working class could improve its lot through militant union struggles or by voting for Labor. Within the framework of a nationally-regulated economy, the ruling class could be pressured for concessions.

Resting on aspiring labour bureaucrats and parliamentary careerists, the Labor Party rejected vehemently the fight of the Marxist movement for a unified global struggle of workers to overthrow capitalism and reorganise society for the benefit of all, not private profit.

That is why Labor has been called to office in every great crisis of capitalist rule. During both world wars and the 1930s Great Depression, the Australian ruling establishment turned to Labor governments, supported by the unions, to enforce the sacrifices of lives and livelihoods it required.

During the post-World War II boom, the capitalist class could afford to make limited concessions to head off the struggles of the working class. But the national-reformist program of Labor and the unions was shattered by the globalisation of production from the 1980s, which enabled transnational corporations to readily shift their operations from one country to another to secure lower labour costs.

The Accords of Hawke and Keating marked the transformation of Labor and the unions, like their counterparts worldwide, into apparatuses that work to reverse the past gains of the working class in order to help make "their" national capitalist economy "competitive" on the world market.

No longer was a question of pressuring employers for concessions to workers, but rather of the unions strong-arming workers for "trade-offs" to ensure employers

remained profitable.

Today, we see the end product of that process. For Labor and the unions, workers must be put back to work as quickly as possible so that their labour power can be exploited once again, even if that means countless deaths.

Conclusions need to be drawn. The coronavirus pandemic graphically demonstrates that there is no possibility of reforming the capitalist system in Australia or anywhere else in the world. Aided and abetted by all its political servants, including the Labor and union apparatus, the ruling classes are willing to let hundreds, thousands and even millions die to ensure the flow of profits to the wealthy few.

This social order does not deserve to continue and must be overthrown. The working class is the only social force capable of carrying out that historic task and building a socialist society.

Instead of big business and the banks being propped up by the intervention of the capitalist state, they must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. This means the working class must take power out of the hands of the financial elite and reorganise society to meet the pressing needs of the overwhelming majority of society, not the wealthy few.

Rather than capitalist nation-states fighting each other for resources and profits, it is necessary to establish workers' governments working together in a globally coordinated response to the threat to humanity presented by the coronavirus.

The critical lesson of all the strategic experiences of the 20th century is that to overthrow capitalism, a revolutionary party is needed to educate, mobilise and lead the working class in the struggle for power. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties internationally. We urge our readers to join the SEP to take forward this struggle.



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