

# Australian PM launches union-employer offensive against workers

Oscar Grenfell  
27 May 2020

In an address to the National Press Club yesterday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison outlined a far-reaching assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class, to be carried out by a tripartite coalition of trade unions, employers and governments.

As the speech demonstrated, the entire political establishment is seeking to utilise the coronavirus pandemic to implement long-standing plans for a further pro-business restructuring of industrial relations and workplace conditions.

The thoroughly corporatised unions are the central enforcers of this agenda, taking to a new level their decades-long collaboration with governments and big business against the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The speech was delivered amid the rapid removal of lockdown measures introduced to contain the pandemic. The Liberal-National government and its state and territory counterparts—mostly Labor Party-led—are reopening schools, ending restrictions on mass gatherings and herding employees back into workplaces, despite ongoing community transmission of COVID-19, especially in the two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria.

Morrison declared that it was time for all sides to abandon “tribalism, conflict and ideological posturing,” and “put their weapons down.”

His comments point to the fears in ruling circles of mounting social and political discontent, amid a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. They were a call for the unions to step up their suppression of workers’ opposition under conditions of widespread hostility to the back-to-work campaign and the social crisis that the pandemic has deepened.

This offensive, which will result in further coronavirus outbreaks, is aimed at a full resumption of

corporate profit-making. This means the ever-greater exploitation of the working class, along with an assault on social spending.

The prime minister hailed the role of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates, thanking them for their collaboration over the past three months.

The unions have enforced cuts to wages and conditions, including the slashing of overtime pay and shift restrictions for millions of fast food, hospitality and clerical workers. In the university sector, the unions have sought to impose pay cuts, while policing the destruction of thousands of jobs.

Morrison revealed that he had met with ACTU secretary Sally McManus before delivering the speech. Since the crisis began, McManus has been in constant discussions with the government, prompting Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter to declare her his “BFF” [best friend forever].

To help cement a partnership with the unions, Morrison said his government would not seek to pass its Ensuring Integrity bill. The legislation had provoked opposition from the unions, not because it attacks the democratic rights of workers, but because it could jeopardise the unions’ ability to bargain away workers’ jobs and conditions.

Morrison declared that unemployment and underemployment would rise. He insisted that workers must accept further pay reductions if they are to keep their jobs. The days of seeking even “marginal benefits,” in terms of improved wages and conditions, are over, he stated.

Morrison outlined five “working groups.” They will focus on “simplifying” industrial awards, changing enterprise bargaining and overhauling regulations governing casual and fixed-term employment. Other

groups will draft proposals on workplace compliance and “greenfield agreements” between companies and unions covering new enterprises, struck without any pretence of consultation with future employees.

Each of the groups will include corporate, government and union representatives. In order to use mass joblessness as a battering ram against workers as quickly as possible, the groups are to present recommendations in September, with legislation to follow by October.

Morrison said enterprise bargaining and industry awards were “not fit for purpose, especially given the scale of the jobs’ challenge that we now face as a nation.” His comments dovetail with demands from the Australian Industry Group (AIG), the Business Council of Australia and other corporate lobbies.

The AIG has advocated “individual enterprise flexibility,” so businesses can impose cuts to wages, conditions and jobs without legislative restrictions.

Morrison’s speech was hailed by the unions, as well as the financial elite. The ACTU said it “welcomes the opportunity to sit down with the government and employers to discuss how our economy can be rebuilt as flagged by the prime minister.”

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* this morning applauded the dawn of an “Industrial Peace Accord for post-crisis jobs and growth.” The newspaper’s editor-at-large Paul Kelly praised the “echoes of Bob Hawke in Scott Morrison’s consensus approach.”

The Accords enforced by the ACTU under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s were tripartite agreements between the government, the corporations and the unions. They provided for the deregulation of the economy, the smashing up of workers’ conditions and the destruction of thousands of manufacturing jobs.

In addition to invoking this legacy, Morrison signalled that his government will step up a protracted assault on public healthcare, education and other social services. He foreshadowed an overhaul of TAFE technical colleges, aimed at gearing tertiary education to ever-more directly meeting the needs of big business.

The offensive underscores the urgent necessity for workers to break from the unions, and to turn to a new, socialist perspective. As is the case internationally, the Australian political establishment, including the unions,

has responded to the pandemic by doing everything to shore up the enormous profits of the financial elite. Health and safety have been jeopardised across the board, while jobs, wages and conditions are under an unprecedented attack.

The alternative is the fight for workers’ governments that would implement socialist policies, including placing the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, guaranteeing decent, full-time employment and allocating trillions of dollars to healthcare and education.



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