

Australian Labor Party leader demands budget “discipline” and “back to work”

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On the eve of next Tuesday’s crisis federal government budget, Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese delivered another pro-business “vision” speech this week, this time reiterating the financial elite’s calls for fiscal “discipline.”

Albanese supposedly laid out what a Labor government would do in the budget to resolve the worst mass unemployment since the 1930s Great Depression, triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the economic collapse, the October 6 budget is expected to reveal a record deficit of more than \$200 billion for 2020–21—a far cry from the government’s pre-COVID boast that it would produce a surplus.

The bulk of this deficit, which is five times greater than during the 2008–09 global financial meltdown, has come from bailing out big business with wage subsidies, tax concessions, central bank-financed cheap loans and other “support packages” worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

After providing the Liberal-National Coalition government with “constructive” support for these bailouts and every other measure during the pandemic, the Labor Party is now trying to differentiate itself from the government, sensing the growth of social distress and discontent.

Albanese’s main pitch is for big business to again rely on a trade union-supported Labor government in a period of economic and political turmoil, as it did under prime ministers Hawke and Keating in the 1980s and 1990s, and prime ministers Rudd and Gillard during the post-2008 crisis.

While feigning sympathy for the million jobless workers and the 400,000 more expected to be unemployed by Christmas, Albanese said the Coalition government should only spend money on projects that would boost “productivity” and “economic growth.”

With the country in a “deep and painful recession... we can’t avoid the need to borrow money to get by until the economy recovers but we should be disciplined about it.”

In other words, while more government “stimulus” spending was necessary, not least to head off a social

explosion amid widespread impoverishment, it had to be tightly targeted to satisfy the requirements of corporate profit.

Albanese criticised Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government from the standpoint of the financial aristocracy, accusing it of running up too much government debt, both before and during the pandemic.

“The Coalition will have to explain how it can argue that the \$1 trillion debt is manageable, but the one quarter of that, which they inherited, was not,” he said.

The Labor leader’s other main theme was to back the ruling-class drive for a full and rapid “return to work.” Despite the pandemic resurging worldwide, precisely due to the employers and their governments herding workers back into workplaces to generate profits, he declared: “We’ve got to get this nation back to work. And fast.”

Albanese’s speech echoed the demands of the corporate boardrooms. They have voiced concerns that Morrison’s government is not moving quickly enough to unleash austerity measures to impose the burden of the economic crash and huge budget deficits on working-class households.

Albanese’s message was almost word for word with the *Australian Financial Review*’s September 30 editorial. It said the government’s budget “will spend and invest to create desperately needed new jobs and reboot national growth. But it cannot restore real long-term confidence unless it also charts a course back to fiscal discipline for a newly indebted government.”

In trying to marry the corporate complaints with a phony appeal to workers, Albanese criticised the government for cutting JobKeeper wage subsidies and JobSeeker dole payments too swiftly, while complaining that JobKeeper had allegedly led to some casuals being paid too much.

The Labor leader outlined three vague proposals for government spending—on social housing, transport infrastructure and train carriage building. They were all couched in terms of trying to urgently spur corporate investment, while appearing to focus on job creation.

“For me, there are three immediate priorities next

Tuesday,” Albanese said. “Jobs. Jobs. And jobs... We must generate the economic activity that will create new jobs quickly while also boosting our productivity.”

One of the fastest ways to get money into the economy and “tradies back on the tools” would be to invest in social housing.

Not the slightest detail was provided—not even ballpark spending pledges. Nor did Albanese offer any explanation for the failure of the last Labor government’s similar promises of boosting social and “affordable” housing, which mostly handed a profit bonanza to private developers and construction companies.

Nationalist rhetoric was another feature of the speech. Albanese repeatedly urged the government to support “Australian-based jobs.” These, he claimed, would “create good, secure jobs while strengthening our sovereign industrial and research capabilities.”

Such language serves as a pretext to pour billions more dollars into the pockets of “Australian” corporations—none of which have any record of, or interest in, “good, secure jobs.” At the same time, it feeds into the increasing whipping up of a pre-war atmosphere, primarily against China, in line with Labor’s unconditional backing for the US military alliance.

Albanese concluded with an appeal for even closer collaboration with the trade unions. “What this nation desperately needs is co-operation between business and unions to end the drift to casualisation,” he said.

Labor would “never allow industrial relations reform to be used as a Trojan horse to hurt working families by cutting wages and making it easier to sack people.”

Yet the unions have been closeted in “confidential” talks with the Morrison government and employer groups for four months, seeking means to deliver such “industrial relations reform.”

Albanese said: “Under my leadership, Labor has spent the past 18 months working on a vision for our nation’s future.” He said his “Vision Statements” had projected an Australia “where aspiration is encouraged,” but no-one was “left behind.”

This is sheer hypocrisy. Labor’s union-backed program of satisfying the appetites of the ruling class, pioneered by Hawke and Keating, has helped generate yawning social inequality. The billionaires are acquiring vast wealth, “leaving behind” millions of workers and their families.

In his previous “vision” speeches, Albanese vowed that Labor would be “first and foremost” in “the business of creating wealth,” including by restructuring the industrial relations system to enhance the “gig economy” of casual and contract workers.

Noticeably, Albanese’s latest speech said not a word about

the foreshadowed main plank of Tuesday’s budget—the bringing forward of income tax cuts that will overwhelmingly benefit the rich.

Today’s *Australian Financial Review* featured Albanese as one of “the 10 most powerful people in Australia in 2020.” He was listed after state Labor premiers Daniel Andrews and Mark McGowan—both key members of Morrison’s bipartisan “national cabinet.”

One of the panelists who drafted the “power list,” business consultant David Gazard, commented: “He can, with a nod, give the green light to a whole raft of legislation that could otherwise be controversial.”

Another panelist, Julie Bishop, a former Coalition foreign minister, said: “I think Anthony Albanese’s role is more important than ever. There must be an effective opposition even at a time when we need national unity. Labor wasn’t smashed at the last election. The government won, but not in a landslide.”

These comments underscore the fragility of the political establishment. At the last federal election, in May 2019, many workers, based on decades of bitter experiences, from Hawke to Gillard and Rudd, did not believe Labor’s “fairness” populism, which promised to impose some wealth-based taxes in order to provide limited additional funds for deteriorating public schools, hospitals and social services.

Labor’s vote plunged to a century low of 33.1 percent, dropping most sharply in working-class areas, leaving it with virtually no “safe” seats. But the Coalition also lost votes. It barely retained office, assisted by votes for One Nation and other far-right formations that primarily represented a misguided and frustrated protest directed against the entire political elite.

Labor’s response to its debacle was to install Albanese, a leader of its “Left” faction, to lurch sharply further to the right. Albanese soon pledged Labor’s backing for “wealth creation” and a “renewal” of the “Hawke/Keating reforms” that spearheaded the decades-long assault on jobs and working conditions, and redistribution of wealth to the super-rich.



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