

Top union bureaucrat in Australia lashes out at WSWs article

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Obviously stung by the criticisms of the close collaboration of the unions with the Liberal-National Coalition government, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus claimed in a tweet that a WSWs article published last week contained “untruths” in every sentence.

The article detailed the staggering hypocrisy behind McManus’s oppositional posturing over a recently unveiled omnibus industrial relations bill, when she had been in months of secret talks with big business and government representatives to help design it.

McManus responded to the article on December 17 through her Twitter profile @sallymcmanus, declaring: “It is truly a feat to pack in a least [sic] two untruths per paragraphs [sic] (esp when the paras go for two sentences), but you have managed it.”

When the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) through its Twitter account (@SEP_Australia) called on McManus to concretely outline what is untrue, McManus replied: “That’s your job, but if you need help Google should sort out most of it.”

This type of attempt at a contemptuous put-down is standard fare for union bureaucrats attempting to silence criticism—particularly from the working class. However, to state the obvious, it demonstrates that McManus is unable to substantiate the claims she has made.

The WSWs stands by the article. Our indictment of McManus and the trade unions for closed-door wheeling and dealing with the government and corporate elite is entirely accurate.

When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in March, the ACTU rushed to help the government and employers scrap basic conditions. In April, McManus, speaking on Australian television, told 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 was a pledge to big business that the unions would continue to oversee the gutting of working conditions, including leave entitlements and penalty rates, as part of the right-wing Coalition government’s JobKeeper program.

This fraudulently-named scheme, completely backed by the unions, allowed employers to cut the wages of workers to a paltry \$1,500 a fortnight via a government subsidy given directly to businesses, not the employees. By May, more than 41,000 businesses with a turnover exceeding \$250 million were enrolled. Large numbers of workers were not eligible and were left in the lurch by the government, employers and the trade unions.

There is no public record of how much money employees received on the scheme. This was just one of number of “stimulus” packages and low-cost central bank financed loans provided to big business by the federal, state and territory governments to the tune of more than \$400 billion. These huge sums are now to be extracted from the working class through the cutting of working and social conditions.

The massive transfer of wealth to the top end of society was only possible through the direct collaboration of the unions and McManus herself. She was personally thanked for her services by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter. Porter remarkably declared that McManus was his “BFF” (Best Friend Forever).

This partnership evolved into more than five months of backroom talks, deliberately hidden from workers, between McManus, representatives of big business and the government. After more than 140 hours of discussion, the draft omnibus industrial relations bill was the final product.

The bill contains a raft of provisions to erode workers' conditions, including a further push toward casualisation and the stripping of what limited rights workers still have. The bill is so nakedly anti-working-class that McManus felt compelled to hypocritically denounce some provisions in the bill, while again signalling to the government her willingness to negotiate over the final product.

The fact that McManus felt compelled to lash out at the WSWs is revealing. Ordinarily, the union apparatus contemptuously ignores any criticism. McManus's response indicates that there is growing groundswell of opposition in the working class to the deepening assault on jobs, wages, conditions and social services.

Most glaringly, the unions have collaborated in compelling workers to continue to work during the COVID-19 pandemic in unsafe conditions with little or no protection across a wide range of industries. Workplaces, including in the meat industry, have been significant sources of infection. This is in line with the demands of big business for the continuation of production and profits at the expense of the health and lives of workers.

It is no accident that McManus has singled out the WSWs. It alone has systematically exposed the anti-working class role of the unions.

As well as the adulation of governments, big business and the establishment media, McManus enjoys the support of the various pseudo-left organisations, including Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative. They have made no criticisms of the unions throughout this pandemic.

McManus's appointment as ACTU secretary in 2017 was greeted with gushing enthusiasm by these layers. Socialist Alliance, writing on 18 March 2017, declared that her appointment would see "a strategic shift in the trade union movement in this country." Socialist Alternative made similar comments.

McManus, who is regarded as a "left" in these circles, initially expressed some handwringing concerns about social inequality, but those quickly evaporated. What McManus and the ACTU have overseen is job cut after job cut. They have worked hand-in-glove with employers to ensure the suppression of any movement of workers against the widespread pro-market restructuring carried out by big business under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We can confidently predict in advance that McManus's absurd posturing as an opponent of the industrial relations bill will go the same way. Notwithstanding any minor amendments and possibly even union protest stunts, it will be pushed through and implemented with the assistance of the trade unions and the opposition Labor Party.



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