Global and domestic tensions fuel moves to oust Australian Labor Party leader

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Manoeuvres are underway to dump the increasingly discredited leader of the opposition Australian Labor Party, Anthony Albanese, following the inauguration of the Biden administration in the US.

Last weekend, former party leader Bill Shorten publicly criticised Albanese's policy agenda, stoking the pressure that has been applied to him for months. Shorten has remained in parliament despite leading Labor to two consecutive election defeats at the hands of the widely hated Liberal-National Coalition—including the supposedly "unloseable" election of May 2019.

The moves to oust Albanese are intensifying as the worldwide COVID-19 catastrophe worsens, fuelling working class unrest internationally, and the incoming Biden administration steps up the US confrontation with China. Significantly, Shorten has a record of close ties to Washington.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the infighting wracking the Labor Party and its associated trade union bureaucrats, the result will be a continued commitment to pro-business policies and an unconditional alignment behind the aggressive US drive to stop China challenging the global hegemony that Washington secured via World War II.

In his comments, Shorten voiced concerns in ruling circles that the Labor Party is failing to capture and contain the growing working class discontent with the deepening offensive against jobs and working conditions during the pandemic. Shorten called for an opposition "that stands for something," saying: "We must be a party of Labor that stands for the real world concerns of working men and women."

This is rank hypocrisy coming from a former trade union bureaucrat and party powerbroker. Shorten became notorious over decades for betraying and suppressing struggles by workers. At the 2016 and 2019 elections, his phony rhetoric about a "fair go" for workers lacked any credibility.

Shorten's remarks reflect nervousness that Labor has been unable to recover any ground since its 2019 debacle. Its vote plunged to a near century-low of 33 percent, despite the unpopularity of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the instability and factional warfare in the Coalition.

This historic disintegration of Labor's support, especially in working class areas, is of grave concern to the ruling class, which has relied on Labor and the unions since Federation in 1901 to subordinate workers to the requirements of capitalism, particularly during economic crises and wars.

It was the Labor governments of Hawke and Keating, working hand-in-glove with the unions via prices and incomes Accords, that carried through the last brutal restructuring of the economy along free-market lines, destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs and suppressing the opposition of workers.

The fear in the political establishment is that a social explosion could occur if Labor and the unions cannot keep a lid on the discontent produced today by the greatest levels of mass unemployment, wage-cutting, poverty and social inequality since the 1930s Great Depression.

As soon as Albanese was installed as Labor leader, he slavishly followed the line of the corporate media. He falsely attributed Labor's humiliating loss to having pursued policies that claimed to address the mounting social inequality imposed by the financial elite at "the big end of town."

Albanese vowed to forge closer ties to business leaders, boost "wealth creation," rather than "wealth distribution," and pursue bipartisanship with the

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Morrison government.

Once COVID-19 erupted, Albanese went further. He collaborated with the government, business chiefs and the unions to restructure economic and class relations via the official response to the pandemic, at the expense of workers' jobs, wages and basic conditions.

Last November, facing rumoured challenges to his leadership, Albanese made an even more craven pitch to big business, both for himself and for the return of a Labor government. He used a Labor Party business fundraiser to declare Labor is "pro-aspiration, pro-entrepreneurship, pro-wealth creation and pro-growth." He told corporate executives: "We should be cooperating in the knowledge that ultimately, we are all on the same side, striving for the same objectives."

This language underscores Labor's absolute commitment to servicing the profit requirements of the corporate elite, and enforcing them against the working class.

Last week, on the same day that Biden was inaugurated, the embattled Albanese made another appeal to both the Australian and US ruling elites. He emphasised his party's historic and abiding commitment to the US-Australia military alliance and its support for Washington's escalating confrontation with China. He chided Morrison for the prime minister's personal closeness to Donald Trump, thus arguing that he and a Labor government would be best placed to deepen the alliance under the new Democratic Party administration.

As far as Shorten and his backers are concerned, however, Albanese's pledges to the US and big business are not reliable or strong enough. At the same time, if Labor is to prevent a social eruption it must seek to channel mounting working class opposition into once again returning Labor to office.

Acutely conscious of the working class disaffection, Shorten sought to distance himself from the extent to which Labor, led by Albanese, has pursued a nakedly pro-corporate policy and provided the Morrison government with bipartisan backing.

Speaking at a book launch for right-wing faction Labor leaders on Sunday, and repeated in interviews on Sky News and Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, Shorten said he had learned his lesson from the 2019 defeat. The problem, he insisted, was that Labor had promised too much. But the answer was not to offer too little—a "tiny" policy agenda. Labor had to "stand for something" in order to regain office.

Shorten aligned himself with another Labor leader, right-wing faction boss Joel Fitzgibbon, who quit Albanese's shadow cabinet late last year, publicly precipitating the push to replace him.

Whoever leads Labor, however, there is no doubt that Washington will be heavily involved in the backroom machinations and will veto anyone not regarded as fully ready, willing and able to back a US war against China and suppress popular opposition to such a disastrous conflict.

In 1975, the CIA was active in the destabilisation and dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government after the Nixon administration became concerned that Whitlam had failed to contain the strike movement in the working class.

In 2010, as US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks documented, US "protected sources" inside the Labor leadership spearheaded the installation of Julia Gillard to replace Kevin Rudd. Rudd, like all the Labor leaders, was committed to the US alliance but he had argued that the US should make some accommodation to the growth of the Chinese economy.

The latest machinations surrounding the Labor leadership underscore the necessity for working class and young people to make a conscious political break from the Labor Party and its union accomplices. Hostility toward Labor, as evinced by many workers in May 2019, is not enough by itself. The only alternative to the drive to war and the social and environmental disasters created by capitalism is the struggle for socialism internationally by workers and the refashioning of society on the basis of meeting social need not profit. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.

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