

Australian Labor Party and unions pretend to oppose corporate offensive on workers' jobs, pay and conditions

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Desperate to halt the collapse of what remains of their working class support, the Australian Labor Party and its associated trade union bureaucrats are trying to portray themselves as workers' champions in the face of the intensifying government-corporate assault on working conditions.

Having policed every attack on workers' jobs, wages and basic rights for decades, and joined hands even more closely with the employers and the Liberal-National Coalition government since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are terrified of the prospect of rank-and-file opposition, such as that by the Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange in southwest Sydney.

This week, the Coles workers rejected a sell-out deal proposed by the United Workers Union that would close their facility and destroy the majority of their jobs. Their stand, in defying a near three-month lockout by the supermarket giant, could become a trigger for a broader revolt by workers against the government-employer exploitation of the global pandemic to further radically restructure workplace relations at workers' expense.

After propping up Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government for more than a year, following the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe and the onset of the pandemic, the Labor and union leaders are now attempting to distance themselves from the Coalition by proclaiming that they will oppose its omnibus industrial relations bill.

The bill contains sweeping measures to further destroy workers' conditions. These include provisions for "greenfields" employer-union agreements on new projects, to be struck without any consultation with

workers, that will lock the workforce into whatever sub-standard conditions are accepted by the unions, for up to eight years without any right to strike. They also feature the effective scrapping of the "better off overall test" (BOOT) that supposedly requires new union-negotiated enterprise agreements to not disadvantage workers.

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese, whose position is increasingly under threat, is cynically hoping to use the issue to head off the growing moves within the party's parliamentary caucus to dump him. "We will not vote for any legislation that cuts wages or cuts conditions such as penalty rates," he declared this week, while not ruling out accepting the government's bill with amendments.

Never mentioned by Labor, or the government, or the corporate media, is the fact the bill builds on the reactionary "Fair Work" legislation imposed by the last Labor government of 2007–13, with the full backing of all the unions. The Morrison government has retained this legislation because it outlaws all industrial action, except during narrow enterprise bargaining periods at individual workplaces, and legally protects employers who lock out workers, as Coles has done in Sydney.

Whatever the outcome of Labor's leadership infighting, all the Labor leaders agree with these repressive measures, designed to suppress solidarity action and all unified working class struggles. They also agree with the basic program pursued by Albanese, who has appealed for the support of big business by vowing to back "wealth creation" and pitched Labor as the best partner for the Biden administration as it steps up Washington's confrontation with China.

For its part, the Australian Council of Trade Unions

(ACTU) is now running an expensive advertising campaign, dubbed “for the workers.” It declares that “workers have carried Australia through the pandemic” but “millions of workers have had their jobs wrecked, wages and hours cut and been put at risk of serious illness.”

A ‘Stop the Bus’ ad campaign launched by the Electrical Trades Union and the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union depicts a bus driven by Morrison running down a group of workers, supposedly representing the impact of the government’s industrial relations bill.

This is just as fraudulent as the posturing by Albanese and the rest of the Labor leaders.

Last year, the government was so thankful for the assistance of the ACTU in enforcing cuts to wages and working conditions, ostensibly in response to the pandemic, that Morrison rang ACTU secretary Sally McManus to thank her, and Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter nominated her his “BFF” (Best Friend Forever).

The ACTU and its affiliated unions then spent the rest of 2020 in backroom talks with the government and employer groups, behind the backs of their members, in tripartite “working groups” to draft the key proposals now contained in the government’s bill.

Typical of the unions’ hypocrisy is McManus’s claim that the “outrageous” BOOT proposal was “never raised” during the more than 140 hours of negotiations to frame the bill. In reality, the ACTU struck an agreement during the talks with the Business Council of Australia, representing the largest corporates, to scrap the BOOT in return for fast-tracked approval of union enterprise agreements by the Fair Work Commission. That particular deal ultimately imploded, but it was not for want of trying by the ACTU.

More broadly, BOOT has been a fraud in any case, with the unions repeatedly imposing enterprise agreements on their members that undercut previously hard-fought-for conditions, and permitted the wholesale casualisation of workforces.

McManus has depicted the government’s bill as worse than “Work Choices,” the workplace relations laws introduced in 2005 by Prime Minister John Howard’s Coalition government. These provoked massive opposition from workers and became a major

factor in the 2007 election defeat of that government. Howard lost his own parliamentary seat.

The Labor and union leaders fear a greater social explosion today, amid continuing mass unemployment and “underemployment” and the intensifying attacks on wages and working conditions.

In the latest move, the retail employers groups last week applied to the Fair Work Commission, the industrial tribunal established by the last Labor government, to scrap weekend and after-hours wage penalty rates for low-level supervisors and managers. That would set a precedent for the broader extension of the abolition of penalty rates, on which many workers depend to live.

These moves are only possible because Labor and the unions have suppressed workers’ struggles for decades, especially since the ACTU Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s. The Accords were vehicles for destroying workers’ jobs and conditions, and breaking up rank-and-file organisations, such as workplace shop committees.

This vicious record, and the readiness of the Labor and union apparatus to deepen it in response to the global pandemic and economic crisis, demonstrates the necessity for workers and young people to make a decisive political break from Labor and its union accomplices. The only answer is that advanced by the Socialist Equality Party: the struggle for socialism internationally by workers and the refashioning of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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