

Australian Labor Party leader proposes new union-employer Accord

Mike Head**12 February 2021**

On the pretext of trying to protect workers from “unpredictable, fluctuating pay and hours,” Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese delivered a speech on Wednesday that outlined a plan to collaborate with the employers and trade unions to suppress working class opposition to the corporate offensive.

In the name of securing “rights for gig economy workers through the Fair Work Commission,” Albanese proposed to strengthen the hand of the unions and the Fair Work Commission (FWC) in regimenting the spread of the “gig economy” to entire industries.

Under the banner of “portable entitlements for workers in insecure industries,” the Labor leader promised to “consult” with business and the unions about granting limited rights, such as sick leave, but only where “practical.”

This language typifies the vague, conditional and pro-business character of the speech, which unveiled Labor’s “Secure Australian jobs plan” for the next federal election, which is due by May next year.

In essence, the presentation was a bid for the return of another Labor government to police the intensified corporate refashioning of workplace relations through the COVID-19 pandemic, modelled on the role of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996. Working hand-in-glove with the unions via a series of Accords, these governments sought to satisfy the dictates of finance capital by demolishing permanent jobs, driving down wages and breaking up all rank-and-file workplace organisations.

“The best governments in our history have understood the need for a compact between business and their workers to advance their mutual interests,” Albanese declared. “The Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating are a prime example. Collaboration between workers, employers and the government of the day delivered genuine enterprise bargaining and the

conditions that created 30 years of continuous economic growth.”

In reality, the past three decades have produced in Australia, as internationally, staggering levels of social inequality, with the wealth of the billionaires soaring to previously unheard-of heights, accompanied by the unprecedented suppression of working-class struggles.

As a result, about one-third of workers in Australia are now in insecure casual or part-time work, or have become turned into “independent contractors,” trying to survive as sub-contractors and other small businesses.

Three related political crises lie behind Albanese’s speech. One aim is to try to differentiate Labor from the widely loathed Liberal-National Coalition government, with which Labor and the unions have cooperated closely, particularly since the 2019–20 bushfire calamity and the eruption of the COVID-19 disaster.

Albanese defended this virtual partnership with Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government. “Under my leadership, Labor has been constructive,” he insisted. “During the pandemic we have not opposed government measures for the sake of it, even when we have had justifiable concerns.”

Then he added: “But let me be very clear, the Labor Party will never support any legislation that undermines the pay, conditions and security of Australian workers.” Labor has falsely postured as an opponent of the government’s current industrial relations bill, despite the Labor-affiliated unions having spent five months behind closed doors last year hammering out the main features of the legislation with government and business groups.

Albanese depicted the bill as the greatest threat to working conditions since the Howard Coalition government’s “Work Choices” legislation, which provoked such working class opposition that it contributed to the landslide defeat of Howard and his government in 2007. But the present Coalition

government has deliberately retained the last Labor government's "Fair Work" laws, which permit companies to lock out workers, while banning all industrial action except during the union-controlled "enterprise bargaining" periods.

Another factor for Albanese is to shore up his own leadership. It is under threat because of his inability to recover any ground for Labor since its debacle at the May 2019 election. Labor's vote fell to a near-century record low of 33 percent, despite the Coalition's vote also dropping, because many workers, based on three decades of bitter experiences, did not believe Labor's claims to be fighting for a "fair go" for workers. For now, Albanese is clinging to the leadership, mainly because his rivals are equally discredited.

Above all, Labor and the unions are seeking to head off an explosion of working class resistance to the corporate assault. What they fear more than anything is a breakout of workers from the grip of the unions. That prospect has been highlighted by last week's vote by the Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange in southwest Sydney to reject a United Workers Union (UWU) sellout of their struggle against a three-month, and now indefinite, lockout by the supermarket giant, one of the biggest employers in the country.

During his speech, Albanese laid out "eight elements" of Labor's "Secure Australian jobs plan." They included amorphous proposals to insert "job security" as an "objective" to be considered by the FWC tribunal and to legislate to create a "fair test" to determine when a worker can be classified as a casual. Not an ounce of detail was provided.

Albanese pledged that Labor would "restore the Fair Work Commission to the centre of our workplace relations system." He said: "Labor has always stood up for the independent umpire." There is nothing independent about the FWC. Staffed by judges who are former union bureaucrats and employer representatives, it is the primary arena through which the unions, which have entrenched legal status in this state agency, straitjacket workers within Labor's anti-strike laws.

All these "elements" of Labor's platform are based on meeting the requirements of the corporate elite, while shoring up the privileged position of the Labor and union bureaucracy. Before outlining his eight points, Albanese emphasised his commitment to a mutually-beneficial "partnership between government, business and unions."

This partnership is at the direct expense of the jobs, wages and conditions of the workers that the unions

falsely claim to represent.

The Labor leader declared: "A government I lead will always respect the central importance of successful businesses as job creators." While hailing the employers, he painted a mythical picture of class relations.

"Good employers give their workers security and a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. In return, good workers give their employer loyalty, understanding that their jobs are linked to the viability of their employer's business."

Labor and the unions have always sought to subordinate workers to the "viability," i.e., profitability of their employers. With the globalisation of production, that means pitting workers against each other around the world to provide "their" companies with the cheapest labour.

The suppression of the struggles of the working class by Labor and the unions over the past 30 years in the interests of "viability" have coincided with the stagnation and reversal of workers' wage rates, the destruction of working conditions and the erosion of democratic rights.

The truth is that the interests of workers and employers are diametrically opposed. Rather than a "fair day's pay," companies pay workers as little as possible, precisely in order to extract surplus value, and hence profits, from their labour power.

Concluding his presentation, Albanese said he was "impressed by the flexibility and innovation shown by Australian businesses as they have adjusted to technological change." But only a Labor government could add a "balance of fairness" to those "adjustments" as part of its "compact" with the employers.

That mirrors what the UWU has told the locked-out Coles workers: You cannot oppose the closure of warehouses and the destruction of thousands of jobs to make way for automated facilities; you can only assist Coles to enforce a "just transition" by offering slightly higher redundancy payments.

Albanese's speech underlines the necessity for workers to make a clear break from Labor and the unions, establish genuine new working class organisations, such as rank-and-file committees, and take up the fight for a socialist program to overturn the profit system and completely reorganise society on the basis of social need.



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