

Australian Labor Party prepares for war and social unrest

Mike Head
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The most notable feature of this week's two-day online Labor Party "Special Platform Conference" was the frequency of the references to crisis and war.

With the current Liberal-National Coalition government visibly unravelling, the event amounted to a rather anxious pitch to the corporate elite by the Labor leaders and their trade union partners presenting themselves as uniquely qualified to prosecute its agenda in the face of unprecedented geo-strategic and social tensions.

In his opening speech, party leader Anthony Albanese claimed the mantle of the Labor governments of prime ministers Curtin and Chifley from 1941 to 1949. "In Australia's moment of greatest crisis at the height of the Second World War, John Curtin, led the nation out of military danger then Ben Chifley led into reconstruction," Albanese declared. "Their motto—victory in war and victory in peace."

Likewise, shadow foreign minister Penny Wong referred to a "less stable and more dangerous world" in which conflicts had been accelerated by COVID-19. "We face the most challenging circumstances since World War II," she said. "Only Labor has the vision and discipline to address these issues." She boasted that Labor had forged the US alliance during the last world war.

Party president Wayne Swan, who was the treasurer in the last Labor government from 2007 to 2013, declared that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government was "falling to pieces." Therefore, the "nation looks to us," as it always had in times of war and when economic "reform" was needed. Labor had "mobilised the country" when faced with "invasion in World War II." And it had restructured the economy in the 1980s and 1990s. That was when the Hawke and Keating Labor governments worked via Accords with the unions to destroy workers' jobs and conditions to satisfy the dictates of the financial markets.

Even more than previous Labor conferences, this was an extraordinarily scripted and orchestrated event. Every hand-picked speaker endorsed a policy platform that commits a Labor government to fiscal "prudence" in the wake of the

devastating global pandemic and a stepped-up commitment to the US military alliance as the Biden administration intensifies Washington's confrontation with China.

Adopted unanimously, the document vows that a Labor government would "be an effective and collaborative partner with the business community" and "promote Australia's international competitiveness"—all with the help of greater "workplace collaboration" between business and unions. It pledges to strengthen "the US Alliance" because of "its vital importance to Australia's national security requirements."

Albanese's opening address on Tuesday added an economic nationalist axis to the further pro-business shift that he spearheaded after being installed as Labor leader following the party's May 2019 election debacle. At that election, held six months after the party's last national conference, Labor's primary vote fell to just 33.3 percent, the lowest in 85 years, with the biggest losses in working class areas.

The Labor leader extolled a plan he had unveiled in the media that morning for a \$15 billion "National Reconstruction Fund" to essentially subsidise big business projects in a "new era of national reconstruction," supposedly like that launched by the Chifley government after World War II.

Albanese declared that the pandemic had shown the economy's supply chains and "sovereign capabilities" were vulnerable. "We shouldn't have to rely on other countries when it comes to protecting and providing for our people," he said. As the danger of a US-led war with China rises, the US and all its allies are seeking to end their reliance on China for strategic goods.

The \$15 billion package is also a slush fund—described as "a combination of loans, equity, co-investment and guarantees"—to attempt to lift corporate investment, which remains at record lows despite all the government and media talk of "recovery."

As well as aligning themselves behind plans for war, the Labor and union leaders are drumming up patriotism and protectionism to divert working class discontent and try to

reverse the collapse of support and their memberships. Demands for government procurement and other policies to favour “Australian-made” products saturated the proceedings.

Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union national secretary Steve Murphy said the promises of restoring domestic manufacturing production via Labor’s investment fund would “play well to our base.” But, revealingly, he warned that workers were “cautious” about such announcements, distrusting Labor’s claims that secure, well-paying jobs would result.

In another rare honest statement, the party’s Queensland assistant state secretary Zac Beers said “workers abandoned us in droves” in 2019 because they did not trust Labor and did not believe its promises.

Throughout the stage-managed event, a hand-picked parade of Labor officials and representatives of the supposed “mighty” trade union movement were each given two minutes to declare that only a Labor government could and would protect working people from the mass unemployment, under-employment and tearing up of working conditions that has intensified throughout the pandemic.

A hint of the reality came when shadow finance minister Katie Gallagher spoke of the need to “provide business with the confidence to invest.” That essentially means working with the unions to suppress workers’ struggles against cuts to wages and conditions, while slashing social spending. Gallagher attacked the Morrison government from the right, denouncing it for running eight budget deficits in a row, pushing up the public debt level.

The incessantly repeated new slogan was Labor is “on your side.” Deliberately vague, it junks the discredited 2019 election rhetoric of a “fair go.” Precisely because of decades of bitter experiences with the pro-business Labor Party and its affiliated unions, that “fair go” sloganeering failed to cut any ice with increasingly disaffected working class voters.

Albanese’s leadership remains in doubt. He admitted that he had come under criticism for collaborating too openly with the Coalition government as it exploited the pandemic to hand hundreds of billions of dollars to big business while deepening the assault on jobs and wages. In a bid to shore up his position, at least for now, he closed the conference yesterday by saying “we are in the home straight to an election” and therefore had to “pull together.”

Labor’s commitment to the Biden administration’s ramped-up offensive against China was displayed most starkly in the session on foreign policy. Significantly, the draft platform was amended to hail the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, which brings Australia, Japan and India into a quasi-military alliance with Washington to encircle and prepare for war against China.

The first-ever Quad leaders’ summit convened by President Biden on March 12 took to a new level the drive by US governments to prevent China from economically or strategically challenging the global hegemony asserted by US imperialism following its victories in World War II.

Even more provocatively, the Labor conference unanimously passed no less than six resolutions denouncing China, accusing it of territorial aggression in the South China Sea, threatening Taiwan, denying basic rights in Hong Kong and Tibet, and committing human rights violations against Uighurs and other minorities in Xinjiang province.

These accusations hypocritically exploit the Beijing regime’s police-state repression—which is directed above all against the working class—to justify intervention by the US and its allies. Of course, there were no such condemnations of the military invasions, occupations, coups, mass killings of civilians and war crimes perpetrated by these powers, including Australia, for decades, including in Afghanistan and Iraq.

To underscore Labor’s commitment to preparations for war, Albanese used media interviews during the conference to support the Morrison government’s announcement of a \$1 billion “sovereign guided weapons enterprise” to manufacture missiles and other guided weapons. “This a bipartisan issue,” Albanese told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s breakfast television show. “Australia does need to be more resilient when it comes to our defence.”



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