

Australian unions back war preparations at Labor Party conference

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One of the most revealing features of last week's Australian Labor Party national conference was the enthusiastic support of the trade unions for the ramping-up of plans for war.

All the unions backed the unanimous votes for a party platform that is committed to expanding military and other war-related production, as well as strengthening the US military alliance because of "its vital importance to Australia's national security requirements" and demonising China.

Party leader Anthony Albanese set the tone for the conference in his opening address, invoking the record of the World War II and post-war 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."

In the same vein, shadow defence minister Brendan O'Connor received an enthusiastic response when spoke against a backdrop of model military ships and helicopters. He vowed that a Labor government would enhance the country's "defence sovereign capability," and help build "a defence industry that can make things here."

Union speakers were given pride of place throughout the staged-managed conference as it adopted a platform that pledges Labor will develop a "strong national defence industry" with "local jobs and local content," including on "major platforms like submarines and ships."

The unions helped pass no less than six resolutions denouncing China for "aggression" or "human rights abuses" on every front nominated by the Trump and Biden administrations, from Xinjiang to Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Not a single union or party speaker referred to the 30 years of unending war waged by successive US administrations, and backed by every Australian government, to attempt to reassert Washington's post-World War II global hegemony,

nor to the resulting massive tolls of death and devastation, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Libya.

A chilling contribution was made by Jenny Kruschel, the Textile Clothing and Footwear (TCF) national secretary of the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU) Manufacturing Division. She echoed the urgent Productivity Commission inquiry ordered by the Liberal-National government into Australia's "supply chain risks" and heavy dependence on China for imports that would be crucial in the event of war.

Kruschel declared that "gaps in our supply chains" showed how vulnerable the country was. She appealed for Australian-based TCF employers to be guaranteed government procurement contracts for military uniforms.

Having presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in the TCF industries during the past four decades, including by "Australian" companies like Bonds, the union is seeking to divert the disaffection among TCF workers into supporting the war drive by supplying the necessary battle dress.

Union speakers claimed, in line with the words of Labor's platform, that military-related industries based on "enforceable" local content requirements would provide "secure, decent, long-term jobs for Australians."

In fact, the opposite is true. Above all, the US confrontation with China threatens to trigger a catastrophic war, likely fought with nuclear weapons, that would endanger the lives of the entire Australian population.

Furthermore, the "war effort" itself will involve governments and the corporate elite demanding ever greater sacrifices of wages and conditions by workers, as happened in both world wars.

Australian-based employers, such as Qantas, Telstra and defence contractors like John Holland or Transfield are no less ruthless than their international counterparts and partners, such as BAE Systems, Raytheon and Thales, when it comes to slashing jobs and conditions.

In 2018, the Liberal-National government announced, with Labor's bipartisan backing, a plan of support and subsidies

to make Australia the 10th largest military exporting country, thus contributing to the global arms race, as well as corporate super-profits.

Last week, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a \$1 billion program to build missiles in Australia. That is part of a massive \$270 billion spend on military hardware over this decade, taking total military expenditure to \$575 billion in just 10 years.

Last week's conference made clear the readiness of Labor and the unions to implement a rapid expansion of the war industries. The platform declares: "This will require national effort and commitment on the part of political parties, government, the Australian Defence Force, vocational and tertiary institutions, local defence industry and relevant unions."

There was a particularly toxic intervention by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). Its national secretary Paddy Crumlin claimed that Australia was being "stood over by foreign powers" and needed to "establish a strategic fleet" of warships and other vessels.

An MUA video featured Albanese addressing an MUA gathering outside parliament house, accusing the Morrison government of "completely opening up our borders" and putting up "a white flag" when the Australian flag should be flying from "our ships." Another Labor leader, shadow financial services minister Stephen Jones, was shown waving an Australian flag on the floor of parliament to back the MUA agitation.

In the video, MUA national officer Ian Bray boasted that because of the "national security" issues, analysts and strategists "from a military background" were saying that the MUA was "right on this."

The Labor Party's reliance on the unions to suppress the eruption of working class struggles while fomenting nationalist poison was personified by MUA national officer Mich-Elle Myers. She presided over the conference in her capacity as the party's national vice president.

As proposed by the MUA, the conference platform calls for "a stronger interface and integration between commercial shipping and Naval, Customs and search/rescue/salvage/emergency response requirements of government" to "improve maritime security."

The conference took to a new level a long-running campaign by the unions to divert workers' anger over job destruction into calls for the expansion of war-related industries. Throughout the closure of the country's car industry by Ford, General Motors and Toyota from 2013 to 2017, the unions suppressed all resistance by car workers while agitating for the shuttered plants to be transformed into factories for military vehicles and other weaponry.

In 2014, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union

(AMWU) submitted a so-called auto jobs rescue plan, entitled "A Prosperous Australia," to the Liberal-National government urging it to channel billions of dollars in subsidies, formerly allocated to the auto giants, to military industries.

Among other things, the AMWU's plan called on the government to "immediately order additional Air Warfare Destroyers and link these builds into the future frigate project so a continuous build program can be developed that supports our Navy and our manufacturing industry."

Two prominent unions are currently conducting petition campaigns to boost the war industries. One by the AMWU declares that cuts to defence spending "could kill." It claims that shortages are affecting a "silent army" of civilian workers who support the armed forces. "To safeguard national security, Australia needs a civilian workforce capable of designing and maintaining a variety of military equipment," the petition states.

An Australian Workers Union petition urges Prime Minister Morrison to "stand up to China's bullying, protect Australian sovereignty and jobs, and work with nations that support free and fair trade."

The trade unions have a long history of drumming up support for war and encouraging workers to fight on behalf of Australian capitalism. The official history of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, posted on its website, emphasises that once World War I began in 1914, "tens-of-thousands of unionists signed up to the Australian Imperial Forces to serve at Gallipoli, and then on the Western Front."

In 1916, as the brutality of the war became obvious, the unions opposed the Labor government's bid to impose conscription for overseas service, but only on the nationalist basis that "Australians should be free to choose whether or not they would fight in Europe."

Once more, however: "When the Second World War began in 1939 the labour movement swung its support behind the war effort. Through the war years, unionists again signed up in droves to defend Australia."

To fight against the unions' drive to again dragoon them into war, workers have to break from these pro-imperialist apparatuses. They need to form new working class organisations, informed by an anti-war program to unify workers globally in a unified struggle to overturn the capitalist nation-state system and build a socialist world.



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