Australian Labor and unions commit to restructuring working conditions

Max Boddy
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Behind all the various vague and meaningless claims by trade union officials and Labor Party representatives last week at their "Special Platform Conference" about standing up for workers, the event amounted to a pledge to work closely with big business to deepen the assault on jobs and conditions.

In the platform, passed unanimously, Labor committed itself to "boost productivity and build a more dynamic economy" through a greater partnership between "workers, their unions, business, community and government."

This partnership involves the unions doing everything possible to suppress workers' struggles, while Labor implements ever-greater demands to boost company profits, intensifying the cuts already made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The platform vows to develop "a diverse and dynamic business sector" and "make the Australian economy more productive and internationally competitive." Falsely, it claims that this will produce secure, well-paid jobs, when the bitter experiences of the past four decades prove the opposite.

The platform is explicit in pledging that Labor and the unions will step up their collaboration with employers to enforce the ratcheting up of the corporate agenda. "Labor will be an effective and collaborative partner with the business community to help achieve this," it states. "Labor will work with unions and business to support greater industry and workplace collaboration."

That means stepping up the drive by Labor and the unions, especially since the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, to enforce "competitive" conditions on workers, pitting them against their fellow workers globally. This will include the destruction of thousands more jobs, including by the retail and logistics chains, telecommunications companies and airlines.

Aware of the immense discontent brewing in the working class, speakers at the conference declared that only the "great values of Labor" would protect jobs, stem casualisation, defend penalty wage rates and increase the minimum wage. Yet no such commitments exist in the platform: not even for a minimum wage or the right of casual workers to demand permanent employment.

Instead, the document simply states that Labor "supports" an unspecified "living" minimum wage, and "penalty rates as a means to compensate workers for working excessive or unsociable hours." It claims that Labor will adopt a "workplace relations system" to reduce insecure work, but avoids defining casual work, let alone guaranteeing any right to secure employment.

The mechanism for enforcing regressive workplace agreements would be a strengthening of the Fair Work Act (FWA), which was imposed on workers by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government of 2007 to 2013. This legislation, ruthlessly backed by the unions, outlaws all solidarity or economy-wide strikes and any industrial action whatsoever outside narrow "bargaining periods" at individual workplaces.

The platform promises to amend the FWA to facilitate "multi-employer collective bargaining." Under the guise of protecting low-paid employees, this seeks to give unions coverage over entire industries and enable them to reverse their collapsing memberships.

The platform underscores Labor's reliance on the unions to enforce the dictates of big business. Accordingly, union officials were featured in every session of the conference, and Australia Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus was allocated an extended address.

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Her speech should be taken as a warning that the unions' close collaboration with the employers and the Liberal-National Coalition government throughout the pandemic will only escalate. She began by praising workers who "got us through the pandemic." These were the workers, including construction, mining and warehouse workers, whom the unions insisted must remain on worksites despite the COVID-19 risk to their health and lives.

McManus flatly defended the unions' participation in five months of backroom talks last year with the government and business groups to draft a new industrial relations bill. "We knew we were going into a lion's den, but we did so to argue our case, listen to business, and put forward solutions," she declared.

During the more than 140 hours of negotiations with big business, behind the backs of workers, McManus worked so intensively to negotiate agreements that would allow the further gutting of workers' conditions that the then Workplace Relations Minister, Christian Porter described her as his "BFF" [Best Friend Forever].

At the conference, McManus lamented the eventual breakdown of the talks. "Even when the ACTU reached agreement with the BCA [Business Council of Australia], on simple changes that would take the country forward, the Liberal Party reverted to type. Even when we did the hard work for them, they still said no."

The agreement reached with the BCA involved fast-tracking union-negotiated enterprise agreements in return for scrapping the Better Off Overall Test (BOOT), which purportedly prevents workers being "worse off" under a new enterprise agreement.

In reality, the BOOT has long facilitated union-supervised sell-outs of basic conditions and jobs. However, even that pretence of protection of workers was to be scrapped under the BCA-ACTU deal.

When the government's IR bill eventually passed in parliament, the collapse of the ACTU's backroom agreements meant that the legislation was a rump, delivering the employers only more ability to deny permanency to casuals. The government was compelled to drop virtually all other aspects of the bill to win the support of right-wing populist cross-benchers.

Outraged, the *Australian Financial Review* declared: "IR debacle is a lesson in how to waste a crisis." Its editorial said the Coalition had committed a "profound failure" to seize on the pandemic crisis to implement a "Hawke-Keating-sized reform agenda" to achieve "significant incentive-sharpening micro-economic reform."

This reference to Hawke and Keating was a reminder of how their Labor governments worked closely with the unions, via a series of Accords, to impose a sweeping assault on workers' jobs, conditions and basic rights that earlier Liberal-National governments had been unable to implement.

At last week's conference, Labor and the unions put themselves forward as the partnership that, unlike the present unstable Coalition government, could deliver the requirements of the ruling capitalist class in this period of "crisis," social unrest and war preparations.

To signal the unions' full commitment to this collaboration, McManus concluded her speech by saying: "I commend the platform on behalf of the union movement."

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