

Australian Labor Party leader delivers pro-business budget reply

Oscar Grenfell
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In his budget reply speech last Thursday, federal Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese made plain his party's commitment to a further bonanza for big business, while offering only the most token response to the deepening social crisis afflicting millions of working people.

Albanese's address continued Labor's self-proclaimed role, throughout the pandemic, as a "constructive opposition" to the Liberal-National Coalition government. Labor has provided bipartisan backing for unprecedented handouts to big business, increased military spending and a COVID-19 response dictated by profit interests, not public health.

The Labor leader spoke two days after the Coalition introduced a budget that provides another estimated \$50 billion in business subsidies, tax write-offs and investment incentives over the next year alone. This is on top of more than \$400 billion given to the largest corporations by federal, state and territory governments last year, including through the 2020 budget.

The 2021 budget boosts spending for the military, the intelligence agencies and private schools, while providing only a pittance for healthcare and public education.

Despite the glaring class character of the budget, Albanese complained that the government was "all announcement and no delivery." He said not a word against the further subsidies to the financial elite. In fact, he criticised the government's pro-business infrastructure program, which will provide contracts to major corporations, for not involving a larger spend.

The Labor leader bemoaned the absence of purpose-built facilities to replace the private quarantine hotels, which lack protection against airborne transmission and have been staffed by low-paid, casual workers, resulting in some 17 "leaks" of the coronavirus into the community over the past six months.

The flawed quarantine system also became a justification for the government's imposition of an anti-

democratic and discriminatory ban on Australian citizens seeking to flee India's COVID-19 catastrophe.

But Albanese gave no indication of what a Labor government would do to establish adequate quarantine facilities. The existing program has been devised by the National Cabinet, which includes the state and territory government leaders, the majority from Labor.

Albanese criticised the glacial pace of Australia's vaccine roll out, but primarily from the standpoint of its impact on opening the country's international borders. In other words, the main issue was not the jeopardising of the health of the population, but the obstacles to enabling profit-making activities.

Amid the greatest public health crisis in a century, the word "hospital" did not pass Albanese's lips. Even though Australia has had relatively low infection rates so far, the pandemic has repeatedly demonstrated a crisis of the public hospital system which was almost overwhelmed during the country's largest outbreak to date, in Melbourne last July-August.

In terms of Labor's own policies, Albanese's announcements amounted to a drop in an ocean of immense social need. The program he outlined was not aimed at resolving the mounting joblessness, underemployment, homelessness and poverty, but guaranteeing to the financial elite that a Labor government would limit public spending as much as possible.

Albanese said Labor would fund the construction of 20,000 social housing dwellings over the next five years. Social housing, which is directed by non-government and charity organisations, has been used to undermine public housing and justify its privatisation.

Labor's target also represents a minuscule fraction of the housing demand. An estimated 150,000 people are on the public housing waiting list, many of whom applied years ago. Public housing stocks decreased from 331,371

in 2011 to 300,403 in 2020, i.e., a greater number than the “social housing” dwellings that Labor is proposing to build. Over 290,000 people asked for assistance from homelessness services last year, with a third of those who required emergency accommodation not finding it.

Nationally, house prices increased by the fastest rate in 32 years in March, on top of a two-decade property boom. Record low interest rates and tax incentives, backed by Labor, have created a financial bubble. Any solution to the housing crisis would require ending property speculation and placing the banks under public ownership and democratic working class control, which Labor bitterly opposes.

Albanese also pledged to finance 10,000 affordable dwellings for front line workers, including police, but gave no details. He couched both housing programs as a further boon for the construction companies.

The Labor leader offered mealy-mouthed statements of concern over the abysmal pay levels of broad sections of the working class following a decade of wage stagnation or real decline. But the policies he outlined would only entrench the low-wage regime.

These included a pledge to provide 10,000 “New Energy Apprenticeships” for young workers in the renewable energy and related sectors. The government would subsidise their pay, providing a further handout to business, but only to the tune of \$10,000 a year, meaning they would likely receive minimum wages or less.

Albanese referred to the pay rates of aged care workers, amid widespread public anger over the shockingly poor treatment of residents and dire staff conditions. Aged care facilities have been an epicentre of the pandemic in Australia, with hundreds of deaths among residents and large-scale infection of staff. The starting hourly pay rate for a personal carer is just \$21.96.

Yet Albanese refused to indicate any concrete pay rise that a Labor government would support. Instead he said Labor would back the matter being examined by the Fair Work Commission. This pro-business industrial tribunal, created by the last federal Labor government and the trade unions, has for years rubber stamped company-union workplace agreements that have helped slash real wages.

Albanese’s reference to the Fair Work Commission was part of a broader pitch to the financial elite. A Labor government, he stated, would deepen “a new spirit of co-operation between unions and business, striving to improve conditions and productivity.”

Throughout the pandemic, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates have worked

closely with the government and the employers, imposing sweeping cuts to wages and conditions, while backing pandemic subsidies, such as JobKeeper, that underwrote business profits.

Albanese’s emphasis on the trade unions was directed at fears within the ruling elite over mounting social and political opposition from the working class.

Albanese has worked with the unions to shut down disputes, including a protracted struggle by Coles warehouse workers in Sydney who were locked out for 14 weeks, and McCormick food production staff, who struck for five weeks in Melbourne. The unions isolated both struggles and rammed through regressive enterprise agreements.

The Labor leader has repeatedly insisted on returning to the legacy of the Hawke-Keating governments of the 1980s. They struck a series of Accords between the government, business and the unions, providing for the deregulation of the economy, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the suppression of resistance.

Albanese echoed the nationalist rhetoric of the unions. “I’ve never lost faith in our country’s ability to compete and win in the world,” he declared. “I truly believe this is a moment for Australia to make our own.” These statements seek to tie workers to the profit interests of Australian employers, pit them against their fellow workers globally, and dovetail with calls to develop a “self-reliant” national economy to prepare for war.

Albanese did not mention the mounting tensions with China. Labor has been at the forefront of backing US-led plans for war with Beijing. The last government signed onto the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” a massive military build-up throughout the region, in 2011.

Albanese’s budget reply once again demonstrated that Labor is a big business party, completely hostile to the independent interests of the working class.



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