

Who are the Labor MPs the United Workers Union is promoting at Sydney's General Mills strike?

Martin Scott
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In contrast to their hysterical attacks on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members attempting to speak to striking workers at the General Mills “community protest,” United Workers Union (UWU) officials rolled-out the red carpet for federal Labor parliamentarians Tony Burke and Ed Husic last Saturday. Husic has been welcomed to the continuous protest outside the factory’s gates in western Sydney on at least one other occasion.

As the SEP has previously raised, the presence of the two of high-ranking Labor Party representatives is a warning to workers that the union is preparing a sell-out.

It continues a pattern established by the UWU in the Coles Smeaton Grange lockout and McCormick Foods strike earlier this year. In both cases, the arrival of senior Labor and trade union figures on the scene was closely followed by major concessions from the UWU.

The union has presented Burke and Husic as supporters of the strike and fighters for the interests of the working class. Nothing could be further from the truth. That is demonstrated in spades by a brief review of the careers of both of these life-long Labor and trade union careerists.

Ed Husic

Prior to his parliamentary career, Husic was a significant figure in the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU). From 1996–1999 Husic served as vice president of the union’s communications division and from 2006–2010 was the national secretary.

The fact that several of the intervening years (1999–2003) were spent as corporate affairs manager of Integral Energy, a major (then publicly owned) electricity company, demonstrates the cosy relationship between business and the unions.

Husic’s two stints in leadership roles at the CEPU were characterised by major sell-outs of workers at Telstra and Australia Post and the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs.

Between 1996 and 1999, Telstra’s workforce was slashed by more than one-third, from 76,522 to 52,840. The union suppressed any struggle against the job cuts, ensuring that they proceeded without organised opposition from workers.

A Telstra enterprise agreement rammed through by the CEPU in early 1999, despite substantial opposition from workers, changed

employee classifications, resulting in wage cuts for many workers; increased ordinary hours of work; imposed a paltry 2.7 percent per annum pay rise, and abolished limitations on part-time work, creating the conditions for the destruction of full-time positions.

Under Husic’s leadership in 2010, the CEPU shut down industrial action at Australia Post and forced tens of thousands of postal workers to accept a sell-out enterprise agreement that allowed for continuous restructuring directed towards eventual privatisation. Husic, like so many others in the union bureaucracy, went straight from the CEPU leadership to a safe federal parliamentary seat for Labor.

Husic as previous shadow minister for digital economy, was instrumental in the party’s bipartisan support for major attacks on the democratic rights of ordinary people. This included backing the Liberal-National government’s Assistance and Access Act in December, 2018. The legislation, granting numerous state and federal agencies the power to spy on encrypted communication and hack into people’s computers, was rammed through parliament with almost no public debate.

While Husic claimed in 2019 that he had “pushed and pushed and pushed” for changes to the new laws, his complaints had nothing to do with the violation of Australians’ democratic rights. Husic’s issue with the legislation was “economic security—the ability of firms to use encryption.”

Husic is currently Labor’s shadow minister for industry and innovation. He responded to the Coalition government’s May budget, which handed some \$50 billion to big business, by complaining that subsidies to major technology companies had not been large enough. “We need a far bigger commitment,” Husic declared.

Tony Burke

Like Husic, Burke is a longstanding member of Labor’s “right” faction. He has served as the manager of opposition business in the federal parliament since 2013. MPs appointed to this prominent role invariably have the full confidence of the largest corporations, the military and the intelligence agencies. The last three ALP representatives who held the position, Mark Latham, Julia Gillard and Anthony Albanese, have gone on to lead the party.

Burke’s presence at the General Mills strike is a clear signal that the dispute—and the UWU’s ability to contain it—is being closely

monitored at the highest levels of the Labor party.

Before running for parliament, Burke spent six years as an organiser at the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) in the 1990s. The SDA is well known for its far-right Catholic politics and its close collaboration with management. For decades, it has imposed enterprise agreements cutting penalty rates and wages for low-paid workers at major retailers and fast food chains.

Burke's only other publicly-listed employment, aside from a brief stint operating his own business consultancy firm, has been as a parliamentary staffer and full-time politician.

As shadow minister for industrial relations, Burke is playing a leading role in the party's current pitch to big business. This has involved a repudiation of any criticism, however limited, of social inequality, and an insistence that Labor is committed to "wealth creation," "productivity" and advancing the interests of "successful people."

In February, Albanese unveiled Burke's portable entitlements plan, which would increase the powers of the Fair Work Commission, the pro-business industrial tribunal, and allow for the further expansion of the gig economy.

Albanese and Burke have lauded the governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, declaring that if they are elected to office, these Labor administrations of the 1980s and 90s will serve as their model. The Hawke and Keating governments, Albanese has stated, "understood the need for a compact between business and their workers to advance their mutual interests."

In fact, these governments, in collaboration with the unions, carried out some of the deepest attacks on the working class in Australia's history.

Hawke and Keating deregulated the economy, presided over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs, and together with the unions smashed up workplace committees.

As a result, wages fell as a share of national income for the first time since the Great Depression. Labor deployed the armed forces to break the 1989 pilots' strike. The introduction of enterprise bargaining in the 90s ensured disputes were confined to individual workplaces, and workers faced sizable fines if they took industrial action outside of narrow union-controlled bargaining periods.

Burke's role as a pro-business industrial relations spokesperson is in line with his record in every other area, where together with Labor as a whole, he has faithfully advanced the interests of the corporate elite.

In November 2012, as environment minister, Burke signed into law the Murray Darling Basin Plan, which enshrined the commoditisation of Australia's largest water system, allowing major agribusinesses to buy and sell vast quantities of the country's water. This resulted in major environmental destruction, including the death of hundreds of thousands of fish and deprived several rural towns of a potable public water supply.

The plan was met by widespread opposition from ordinary people. A 2017 royal commission which found that Burke's "triple-bottom-line" approach was based on a "fundamentally incorrect" reading of the Water Act, yet Burke continued to defend the plan."

In 2013, as immigration minister in the second Rudd government, Burke led a major escalation of the attacks on refugees. In complete contravention of the International Refugee Conventions of 1951, Labor's "regional resettlement" plan dictated that all refugees arriving by boat be indefinitely detained in the impoverished pacific nations of Papua New Guinea and Nauru and denied any right to seek asylum in Australia.

The Rudd-Burke policy was an extension of an assault on asylum-seekers by successive governments, including the introduction of mandatory detention of refugees arriving by boat by the Keating Labor government and Gillard's enforced repatriation of Tamil refugees to Sri Lanka where they faced official persecution and even death.

As a senior Labor figure, Burke is directly implicated in all of the party's crimes against the working class. This spans from Labor's attacks on the unemployed and welfare recipients, to its support for Australian participation in every US-led war, including the current preparations for conflict with China, and its role in the persecution of whistleblowers and journalists, such as WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange.

The Labor Party, and its leading representatives such as Burke and Husic, are representatives of big business and the banks. They have the closest of ties to the major corporations, such as General Mills, and advance their interests at every turn.

Labor governments not only oversaw the biggest attacks on the jobs and conditions of the working class in history, they also imposed the draconian industrial relations regime that bans virtually all collective action by workers. Burke was a minister in the Rudd government, which in 2009 introduced Fair Work Australia, legislation illegalising most strikes, providing for the victimisation of workers and for continuous pro-business restructuring.

The UWU's promotion of Labor is not the result of misunderstanding. The UWU welcomes big business politicians with open arms, and attacks socialists fighting to broaden the strike, because it is a company union, a "union" in name only. The UWU, like all of its counterparts, advances the interests of a privileged bureaucracy, tied to company management. Its officials receive salaries far and above those of the workers they falsely claim to represent. Many are themselves prominent Labor Party members.

The UWU's collaboration with Husic and Burke is one prong of its efforts to isolate the strike and to prepare the grounds for a sell-out enterprise agreement.

The alternative, and the only means of preventing defeat, is for workers to break out of the entire framework of Labor, the unions and Fair Work, and to take the struggle into their own hands. This means establishing a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of the union, which fights to expand the strike, to involve General Mills' casual staff, its employees around the world and workers throughout the food production industry.

Such a struggle is inseparable from a rejection of the pro-capitalist program of Labor and the unions, and a turn to a socialist perspective, aimed at placing the major corporations and banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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