

Australian Labor Party leader makes pro-business election pitch

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On Sunday, in what was billed as an early campaign launch for the looming federal election, Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese delivered his most explicit bid yet for the backing of the corporate elite.

If elected prime minister, Albanese vowed, he would lead “a government that backs Australian industry.” His “vision” was a country where “unions and business work together.”

With the unstable Liberal-National Coalition government ending the year disintegrating and unable to push any legislation through parliament without Labor’s help, Albanese presented Labor, working closely with the trade unions, as the force that could best enforce the agenda required by the Australian capitalist class.

Ever since Albanese took over the Labor leadership following the party’s debacle at the last election in 2019—its primary vote fell to around 33 percent, its lowest in 85 years—he has pitched for the support of big business. He junked Labor’s phony 2019 promises of offering a “fair go” to working people against the “big end of town.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s already detested government was able to narrowly survive that election because most workers did not believe Labor’s “fairness” posturing. Many recalled the experience of previous Labor governments, from 1983 to 1996 and 2007 to 2013, in restructuring the economy and working conditions in favour of the wealthy.

In his first high-profile speech after becoming Labor leader, Albanese vowed that his party would be “first and foremost” in “the business of creating wealth.”

But Sunday’s performance went beyond his earlier efforts to convince the ruling class that Labor and the unions were their best bet to contain and stifle the rising working-class discontent and political disaffection as the COVID-19 pandemic worsens.

Even Labor’s most recent empty slogan of “on your side” was ditched to unveil an election banner of “a better future.” Any suggestion of being “on the side” of workers had to be cast aside to appeal for big business backing.

Albanese’s commitment to the corporate boardrooms was epitomised by his boast that Labor’s just-announced carbon emission reduction proposal had been hailed by all the major corporate lobbies, as well as the union apparatus, represented by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

“Our plan has already been backed by the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Industry Group, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the ACTU and a range of community organisations,” he said.

This has become the central plank in Labor’s election campaign—claiming that business leaders are supporting Labor’s emissions plan rather than the Coalition government’s proposals, because they offer corporate investors greater certainty and profit-making opportunities.

These business bodies, which cover the large and medium-sized corporations operating in Australia, are enthusiastic about Labor’s totally inadequate policy to supposedly reduce carbon emissions by only 43 percent by 2030. That is because the target—while far too low to help reverse the developing global climate disaster—is mainly to be achieved by handing out massive subsidies to companies and supplying pro-business infrastructure to serve the needs of “green” and “alternative energy” investors.

More broadly, sections of the ruling class are losing confidence in the capacity of the Morrison government to deliver their requirements. In previous periods of economic crisis and rising working class struggles that Coalition governments could not deal with, key business interests and media proprietors, including Rupert Murdoch, swung behind Labor, backing the elections of the Whitlam government in 1972, the Hawke-Keating government in 1983 and the Rudd-Gillard government in 2007.

As part of his avowedly nationalist “vision” for Australian capitalism, Albanese said the emissions plan would help transform the country into a “renewable energy superpower” and “a manufacturing powerhouse” based on cheaper electricity.

This was “a practical example of how I will bring Australians together so we can move forward together.”

Thus, as he has done repeatedly before, Albanese was seeking to adopt the mantle of the “consensus” Prices and Incomes Accords struck with the ACTU by the Hawke-Keating governments from 1983 to 1996, although he avoided specific mention of them.

These pacts turned the unions into corporatist industrial police forces. They have presided over historic cuts to real

wages and working conditions, accelerated casualisation and outsourcing, major privatisations and the smashing up of workers' organisations, such as shop committees. This laid the foundations for the huge transfer of income and wealth to the rich that has intensified ever since.

Precisely because of these bitter experiences over the past four decades, as Albanese knows full well, both the unions and the Labor Party have become hollowed-out bureaucratic shells with shrinking memberships. This is part of the deep crisis that has overtaken the parliamentary elite, with Labor's electoral support still languishing at the 2019 levels despite the Coalition government's disarray.

Albanese is acutely aware of the brewing disgust and unrest in the working class, which is already producing a series of strikes among teachers, rail workers and bus drivers. These stoppages over pay rates, job security and pandemic safety, have broad support in the working class, despite media headlines about "industrial chaos."

For that reason, Albanese included a revealing line in the concluding portion of his speech. While he claimed to advocate a "new direction" for the country, he assured the ruling class: "But we are seeking renewal—not revolution." This "renewal" would be based on the "enduring values" that made Australia "such a great country," such as rewarding "people's hard work."

Albanese's reference to "revolution" underscores the real fears in ruling circles of the growing hostility to the corporate, media and political establishment. There is developing support in polls for socialism, especially among young people, and the potential of that shift to find conscious expression in the genuine socialist alternative advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP is the only party explaining the need for the complete overturning of the capitalist profit system.

Albanese's speech had two stark omissions. First, he made no mention of the global pandemic, or the eruption of the high-transmissible Omicron mutant, which has already arrived in Australia. His only reference to COVID was to describe it, in the past tense, as "difficult days and months" in which "we made sacrifices for each other."

The reality is that the Labor leaders have worked hand-in-glove with the Liberal-National government throughout the still-worsening pandemic, including via the "National Cabinet"—a virtual coalition government. They minimised and then scrapped essential safety restrictions for the sake of corporate profit, while handing out billions of dollars in "support packages" to big business. Together with the union bureaucrats who kept schools and non-essential workplaces open, they bear central responsibility, along with their counterparts internationally, for the ongoing toll of death and health damage, and the emergence of deadly new virus variants.

Albanese pledged to maintain this bipartisan front. A Labor government would "work with State and Territory leaders from across the political spectrum," he stated.

Second, aware of widespread anti-war sentiment, Albanese avoided any reference to Labor's embrace of the AUKUS treaty signed by the Morrison government with the US and UK leaders to ramp up Australia's commitment to US-led preparations for what would be a catastrophic nuclear war against China.

Nevertheless, the Labor leader's speech was full of toxic nationalism from start to finish. This is designed to divert the mounting class tensions outward against supposed external threats, shore up supply chains for wartime conditions, and pit workers in Australia against their Asian brothers and sisters.

Labor's supposed "better future" was premised on using "the purchasing power of government to back Australian businesses and workers," establishing a "National Reconstruction Fund to support businesses in both traditional and new industries," rolling out a "National Rail Manufacturing Plan" to "build trains here" and trying to turn Australia into the "skills and education capital of Asia."

Finally, Albanese echoed Labor's 2007 pro-business election pitch, in which Rudd declared he was a "fiscal conservative," criticising the alleged over-spending of the Howard Liberal-National government.

"I learned the value of a dollar," Albanese said, trying to play on his image as the son of a struggling mother depending on welfare benefits. As with Rudd, this is code for cutting social spending.

That is another warning that as soon as the election is over, whether Labor or the Coalition leads the next government, an offensive will be unleashed to make the working class pay the price for the enormous handouts to business.

These are the socially and politically explosive conditions in which the Coalition and Labor teamed up to ram through parliament new anti-democratic electoral laws intended to deregister the SEP and other parties without seats in parliament.

Both parties are desperate to block dissent from destabilising the discredited two-party duopoly and stifle any working-class struggle or resistance to the homicidal "live with the virus" drive that would blow apart the ability of the next government to impose the brutal measures demanded by the financial elite.



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