

Labor leader promises strategic maritime fleet as part of Australia's preparations for war

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Labor's plan to create a so-called "independent strategic fleet," announced by federal opposition leader Anthony Albanese in the New South Wales port city of Newcastle last week, has nothing to do with the provision of decent jobs and working conditions for merchant marine seafarers.

Rather, the plan is designed to channel hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds into the coffers of major shipping companies to allow them to purchase vessels for their own commercial requirements. At the same time, it is aimed at creating a marine fleet customised to support the Australian ruling class's role in US-led war preparations in the Indo-Pacific region, primarily directed against China.

The strategic fleet proposal is one of a series of policy releases delivered by Albanese over recent weeks, ahead of this year's federal election. Like the others, it is pitched at the financial and corporate elite and is in line with his promise of a Labor government "that backs Australian industry."

In the Newcastle speech, saturated with unadulterated appeals to national chauvinism, Albanese declared: "In times of conflict and crisis, our economic sovereignty and national security are dependent on Australian seafarers working on Australian ships."

"Without a strategic fleet," Albanese proclaimed, "Australia's essential supply lines—including fuel imports—are vulnerable to the decisions of foreign governments or the whims of international shipping companies."

The fleet, Albanese said, was necessary because "the risk of global or regional conflict leaves us vulnerable to the actions of foreign powers."

Just what "global or regional conflict" is the Labor leader referring to? Without naming the "foreign powers" that are supposedly threatening Australia's security, Albanese clearly has China in his sights.

Albanese and Labor are in complete agreement with the Morrison Liberal-National government's AUKUS

partnership with the US and the UK, including the acquisition of at least eight nuclear-propelled submarines. Albanese declared in a statement on September 16: "[The AUKUS partnership] affirms what Labor has been calling for."

In a November interview, he outlined the supposed justification for stepped-up preparations for war with China: "Australia is right to speak up for our own values. China is the nation that's changed in terms of their attitude towards Australian imports, for example, and Australian businesses are suffering."

This is simply war propaganda. In reality, it is the US that is aggressively preparing for war with China, in a bid to ensure American imperialist hegemony throughout the Asia Pacific. Australia is an active participant in the military and strategic preparations, which began under the last Labor government, of which Albanese was a prominent representative. And as part of the belligerent, Australia has imposed far more tariffs on Chinese goods, than Beijing has on Australian products.

In his Newcastle address, Albanese assured big business that the proposed strategic fleet of up to a dozen vessels including tankers, cargo, container and roll-on-roll-off vessels "will be privately owned and commercially operated." This means seafarers employed on these vessels will be subjected to the very same measures taken by privately owned shipping companies over decades to slash operating costs at the direct expense of the workforce.

Seeking to exonerate Labor from any responsibility for this corporate assault on workers' conditions in the Australian shipping sector, Albanese declared that the Liberal-National Coalition government "has stood idle as large multinationals dumped Australian-flagged and crewed vessels so they could hire overseas crews."

"This," Albanese declared, "has destroyed the jobs of Australian seafarers and created a situation where none of the vessels our nation relies upon to deliver its essential

supplies of crude oil, aviation fuel and diesel are registered in this country or crewed by Australians.”

The massive destruction of jobs and working conditions has not taken place just over the last eight years, as Albanese claims, but has been ongoing in shipping and every industrial sector for almost four decades, beginning with the Labor governments led by Bob Hawke and Paul Keating from 1983 to 1996.

Acting on the dictates of global finance capital, Labor struck a series of Accords with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and big business. This cleared the way for deregulation of the economy, implementation of “free market” policies, privatisation of key infrastructure assets and an historic onslaught on workers’ conditions to make Australian capitalism “internationally competitive.”

This included the wholly government-owned ANL shipping line, which operated vessels on the Australian coast and in the Asia-Pacific region. The process to privatise ANL was launched by Labor in 1991 and included a far-reaching restructure in 1994 to dramatically slash operating costs after it failed to attract buyers.

The ANL sell-off was completed in 1998 by the Howard Liberal-National government, which had come to power after Keating was swept from office with the lowest working-class vote in history, a direct response to Labor’s relentless imposition of pro-market policies.

The ANL privatisation was fully supported by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). The union’s national secretary, John Coombs, declared at the time that he had “met with and had very productive discussion” with the government’s nominated buyer, key international freight business CGM.

Harking back to “consensus,” Albanese stated in his Newcastle speech that his government would immediately appoint a taskforce comprising representatives “from the shipping industry, major charterers, unions, Australian business representatives and the Department of Defence to guide it on the establishment of the Fleet as quickly as possible.”

Teresa Lloyd, CEO of Maritime Industry Australia Ltd (MIAL), which represents the collective interests of maritime businesses, registered her support for Labor’s strategic fleet policy. She declared the proposal “will help to reignite Australian maritime activity, kick start home-grown capability and assist Australian businesses to be able to compete internationally, reinforcing our supply chain and civil maritime security.”

The inclusion of maritime unions on the taskforce comes as no surprise. The MUA has long served as an industrial police force for the shipping and stevedoring companies. The union’s role is to suppress workers’ opposition to the

never-ending program of cost cutting and restructuring that has seen thousands of jobs axed, conditions torn up and increased reliance on casual labour.

At the same time, the MUA has conducted a reactionary nationalist campaign to blame foreign shipping workers for job losses. The purpose of this is to prevent the emergence of unified international struggle by Australian seafarers and their overseas counterparts to defend jobs and fight for decent wages and improved working conditions for all.

The MUA has fully backed Albanese’s call for a strategic fleet to ensure “national security in times of conflict,” because it is exactly the perspective the union itself has advanced for years.

The union’s position was expressed clearly by national secretary Paddy Crumlin at the Labor Party’s national conference in March last year. Crumlin claimed Australia was being “stood over by foreign powers” and needed to “establish a strategic fleet” of warships and other vessels.

The MUA’s recent declaration that it “stands in solidarity with workers in all countries in opposing war” and its promotion of limited “No War With China” rallies in December last year were entirely phony efforts to appeal to the genuine anti-war sentiment among its members and the broader working class.

At the same time, the union was attempting to conceal the true implications of its nationalist perspective—to dragoon workers into the war preparations of the Australian capitalist class.

Maritime and waterfront workers should reject the poisonous program of national chauvinism being drummed up by Labor and the MUA and turn instead to a socialist perspective, based on developing the international unity of the working class in opposition to capitalism.

This means a fight for the establishment of a workers’ government that will place shipping, stevedoring and all vital industries under the democratic ownership and control of the working class. Under workers’ control, these key sectors can be operated to meet social need, not to line the pockets and fulfil the imperialist aims of the ruling elite.



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