

Australian Labor leader offers to use pandemic crisis to restructure economy

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Speaking amid an ongoing tidal wave of COVID-19 infections as well as mounting hospitalisations and deaths, Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese delivered an address to the National Press Club this week in which he made not a single mention of this toll, which is particularly being suffered by the working class.

Instead, with a federal election looming, Albanese, who is opposition leader, backed the profit-driven “live with the virus” drive that has let loose this disaster. In fact, he doubled down on his bid for the support of big business by declaring that a Labor government would use the “once-in-a-century crisis” to implement a further wave of economic restructuring.

Albanese’s speech underscored the deepening political crisis of the entire parliamentary establishment. Media polls show that the pandemic has intensified the widespread disgust for the Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. But support for Labor is still languishing near the historic lows that saw Labor lose the last election in 2019 despite falling Coalition support.

The anger and discontent produced by the pandemic, which is already causing a record number of deaths in its third year, has only intensified Labor’s response to that debacle under Albanese’s leadership: To drop its phoney “fair go” rhetoric of 2019 and appeal for the backing of the wealthiest layers of society.

In his first high-profile speech after becoming Labor leader in 2019, Albanese vowed that his party would be “first and foremost” in “the business of creating wealth.” Proposals for limited tax imposts on wealthy investors were quickly repudiated.

Albanese used this week’s address to go further. He called for the pandemic to be exploited to restructure the economy for the benefit of the corporate elite. He

outlined a vision of working in unity with the employers and the trade unions—which are seeking to continue stifling working-class opposition—while paying lip service to improving the chronically underfunded and besieged health and education systems.

“My argument to you today is that if we get this moment right, Australia can emerge from this once-in-a-century crisis better, stronger, more fair, and more prosperous,” the Labor leader declared. Despite the passing reference to “fairness,” the essential thrust was to again to present Labor as the best force to impose a new pro-business “economic reform” offensive.

Answering a question from the *Australian Financial Review*, Albanese said: “We need to get back to the growth agenda and the microeconomic reform and productivity agenda.”

That is the “agenda” spearheaded by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, working closely with the unions. Far from delivering “fairness,” this program has boosted corporate profits at the expense of workers’ jobs, wages and conditions, producing unprecedented levels of social inequality.

In so far as Albanese referred to the impact of the pandemic it was to portray Australians as “exhausted” and “worn-down by bad news, uncertainty, inconvenience, disruption and separation from loved ones.” This dovetails with the corporate-government demand for the full reopening of schools, universities and workplaces, even as the Omicron mutation rages across the country.

In reality, there is rising public resistance to the “let it rip” offensive, in which state and territory Labor governments have played a key role via the “National Cabinet.” Just the day before Albanese spoke, South Australian teachers voted by a two-thirds majority for

strike action against the planned resumption of in-person schooling on February 2.

The greatest nightmare for the Labor and union leaders is that such actions could develop and spread, breaking out of the control of the unions, which have collaborated with employers throughout the pandemic to keep workers on the job, regardless of COVID outbreaks.

That is why a feature of Albanese's speech was to pledge to spend \$440 million by the end of 2023 to supposedly make schools "COVID-safe" by improving air quality and ventilation systems, and providing children with mental health services.

These amounts are totally inadequate and will do nothing to fix the immediate exposure of students and teachers to infection in crowded classrooms. The real purpose of this announcement to stifle the opposition among teachers, school staff, parents and students. As Albanese and shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek admitted in an accompanying media release: "Parents are worried sick about sending their kids back to school."

More broadly, revealing the ruling elite's fear of the rising discontent, Albanese warned against the threat of "polarisation" and "cynicism," and said he wanted people to "have greater faith in the integrity of our parliament and its representatives."

This is from a party that joined hands with the Coalition last August to ram laws through parliament designed to deregister parties, including the Socialist Equality Party, that have no parliamentary representatives. By setting a three-month deadline, in the middle of the pandemic, for these parties to treble their membership lists from 500 to 1,500, Labor and the Coalition launched a naked bid to shore up their discredited two-party system and stifle the voice of disaffected voters.

Albanese accused the Morrison government of a "grand slam of pandemic failure" on testing, tracing, vaccinations and quarantine, but only from the standpoint that these breakdowns were impeding the operations of employers and the reopening of the economy.

Albanese claimed that Labor governments would always be better for public health. Yet his only concrete proposal was to make rapid antigen tests available free. The provision of these less-reliable tests aims to help

slash isolation periods in order to push workers back into production for the sake of profit. In any case, with millions of people unable to find any tests due to a global shortage, Albanese could not say how Labor would supply the tests!

Albanese's performance was again saturated with nationalism, promoting schemes such as Labor's "Buy Australian Plan" to "back our businesses." This is an attempt to divert working class discontent in divisive "anti-foreigner" directions, which also dovetail with preparations for involvement in US-led wars.

Answering journalists' questions, Albanese emphasised Labor's backing for the Morrison government's active role in the intensifying US confrontation with both Russia and China and reiterated Labor's unconditional support for the US military alliance, on which Australian capitalism has depended since World War II.

Albanese's pitch to big business at the National Press Club was a desperate attempt to gain its backing as Labor continues to slump in the polls despite the Coalition government lurching from one crisis to the next. This is another warning that the next government, whether Labor or Coalition, will pursue a program of class war at home and militarism abroad.



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