

Australian Labor Party leader commits to big business restructuring and US militarism

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In two headline speeches to corporate gatherings this week, opposition Australian Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese vowed that a Labor government would outdo the nine-year-old Liberal–National Coalition government in imposing profit-driven “economic reform” and preparing for war.

Albanese’s speeches, following feature-length promotions in the corporate media, are part of his pitch to the ruling class to support a trade union-backed Labor government to suppress the growing discontent throughout the working class.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s increasingly discredited government is wracked by infighting and plotting to remove Morrison. It confronts rising popular disgust over its refusal to protect people from devastating floods, on top of its disastrous record throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and in the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe. Roaring inflation, worsened by the US–NATO confrontation with Russia, is further fuelling anger over falling real wages and soaring social inequality.

Addressing the *Australian Financial Review*’s “New Platform for Growth” conference of business chiefs on March 9, Albanese pledged to “resume the great Australian reform project” implemented by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

Like Hawke and Keating, a Labor government would promote “consensus” between governments, unions and business to produce growth and “stronger profits for businesses.” Albanese boasted that the “great Labor reformist governments of the 1980s and 1990s” had used “reform in areas like competition” to “deliver huge productivity gains.”

All the unions worked hand-in-glove with these Labor governments to inflict severe pro-market restructuring on workers—decimating jobs and conditions, privatising public services, busting up rank-and-file resistance and straitjacketing workers in anti-strike laws.

Albanese went further, adopting the mantle of ex-Coalition Prime Minister John Howard, whose government of 1996 to

2007 exploited Labor’s laws and measures to continue the assault on working class conditions.

Without naming Howard, a hated figure who lost his own parliamentary seat in 2007, Albanese stated: “A former Liberal prime minister once said that in the race for economic reform, you would never reach the finish line because it was always advancing and there would always be something else to do to make our economy stronger and more productive.”

Albanese declared: “I agree. It’s always a race—the race for improvement.” He accused the current Coalition government of “abandoning the field” and running out of “ideas,” “puff” and “time” after a “lost decade.”

Betraying nervousness about the developing working-class unrest, Albanese repeated a refrain that has featured in all his recent speeches. “I’m not proposing revolution,” he said. “I am looking for renewal.”

The Labor leader vowed to reverse the past decade of “inertia and complacency” to renew “the dormant national project to create wealth in a way that produces benefits for all Australians.”

This “trickle-down” claim is a long-proven myth of capitalism. As the past four decades demonstrate, the creation of “wealth” has only benefited the super-rich, whose fortunes have doubled again during the pandemic. This has been at the direct expense of working people, who have paid the price through declining working and living conditions, record levels of household debt, widespread poverty and deteriorating social programs, including public health and education.

As with all Albanese’s recent speeches, this one was heavily laced with reactionary nationalism. He promised to boost “Australian industry” via a “National Reconstruction Fund,” “massive” government buying power and a “10-point Buy Australia plan.”

This partnership with Australian big business will serve only to pit workers against their fellow workers internationally. It will tie them to the employers’ demands for sacrifices in the name of “global competitiveness,”

deepening the attacks enforced by the unions since the 1980s.

Albanese aligned Labor with the mounting criticisms of the business chiefs themselves that the Coalition government has failed to sufficiently exploit the pandemic to launch a new offensive on workers. Morrison told the same event that his government wanted to return to the pre-pandemic “normal” of a business-dictated economic model, whereas Labor is vowing to work with the unions to enforce far-reaching restructuring.

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* welcomed Albanese’s pledges but demanded that he also commit himself to the “strategic imperative” of “workplace reform”—a euphemism for more aggressively dismantling jobs, job security and basic conditions.

The next day, March 10, Albanese spoke on “national security” at the Lowy Institute, a corporate think tank. He doubled down on Labor’s historic role as the party called to office during wartime to preside over the sharp geo-strategic shifts and domestic sacrifices needed for the “war effort.”

He began by reciting extracts from a speech given in March 1942 by Labor Prime Minister John Curtin for broadcast on American radio, in which Curtin declared that Australia “looked to America” following the outbreak of the war against Japan.

Curtin’s broadcast marked the shift by the Australian ruling class, as a junior imperialist power, from its previous reliance on the British empire to its dependence on US imperialism. Albanese used Curtin’s words to reiterate Labor’s role as the initiator of the US alliance, which remained a “central pillar” of Labor’s foreign policy.

On the war front, as on the domestic front, Albanese vowed that a Labor government would go beyond the Coalition government. First, he emphasised Labor’s bipartisan support for every step, including the boosting of the intelligence agencies, taken by the Coalition to prepare for a US-led war against China.

In particular, Albanese highlighted Labor’s backing for the AUKUS pact with the US and UK—an alliance aimed at China—and the related acquisition of long-range nuclear-powered attack submarines from the US or UK. Labor’s swift support for the unprecedented purchase of nuclear submarines proved the party’s “maturity,” he said.

Albanese then echoed criticisms within the military-intelligence apparatus that the Coalition has not done enough. He pledged to review the delayed frigate program, consider increasing the number of Air Warfare Destroyers, assess upgrading weapons on offshore patrol vessels, consider tomahawk missiles on existing submarines and address the “capability gap” due to the delay in the arrival of the nuclear submarines.

Speaking just after the government said it would spend \$10 billion on an AUKUS submarine base and \$38 billion to expand the size of the armed forces, Albanese promised to match the government in increasing military spending “beyond” 2 percent of gross domestic product. Further, he gave an open-ended commitment to ensure that the military “has the resources it needs to defend Australia and deter potential aggressors.”

Albanese stressed there was no difference between Labor and the government on arms shipments to NATO for the Ukraine war and the anti-China policy. He declared that China had “failed in its special responsibility as a permanent member of the UN Security Council” in the Ukraine crisis and had offered Russia relief from sanctions imposed by the US and its allies.

As if to answer commentators, such as the *Australian* editor-at-large Paul Kelly, who have questioned his lack of a track record on “national security,” Albanese recalled that he was a cabinet minister in the Gillard Labor government that “brought US Marines” to the strategic northern city of Darwin. As a shadow minister, he had opposed the 2015 lease of Darwin’s civilian port to a Chinese company, for which US President Obama had admonished the Coalition government.

Likewise, Albanese dismissed any suggestion that he was departing from his record as a long-time leader of Labor’s so-called “left” faction. He brushed aside a remark by Lowy Institute director Michael Fullilove that “probably as a young man you didn’t go into parliament to build a nuclear-powered submarine fleet.” In the opening line of his speech, Albanese emphasised that he regarded “the security of our nation” as “the most solemn responsibility of any government.”

Albanese’s performances, and the generally supportive response in ruling circles, are another warning of preparations for a union-backed Labor government as a means of prosecuting war and imposing the resulting deep attacks on working-class conditions.



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