

# Australian Labor leader Albanese's budget reply: Militarism, business handouts, nothing for workers

Oscar Grenfell  
31 March 2022

In his reply to the federal government's budget last night, Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese signalled three key points in a pitch to the financial elite ahead of the May election.

A Labor government would hand massive sums to the military, on top of record spending; it would intensify pro-business economic restructuring in the interests of the banks and corporations, and it would provide nothing to the working class amid a deepening social crisis.

The context of the speech summed up the bipartisanship between Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, which is such that there is not a single difference between the major parties on any substantive issue.

Two hours before Albanese's reply, both houses of parliament came together to hail right-wing Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky, who delivered an address by video-link. The adulation for Zelensky was a signal of full commitment to Washington's escalating confrontation with Russia, aimed at ensuring the hegemony of American imperialism, as well as its preparations for war against China in the Asia-Pacific.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison told Zelensky: "You have our prayers, but you also have our weapons, our humanitarian aid, our sanctions against those who seek to deny your freedom and you even have our coal."

Albanese gushed: "As you stand up to this latest tyrant, you are showing us what true courage is."

Morrison announced another \$25 million in aid to Zelensky's regime, which is functioning as a puppet of the US and NATO, on top of more than \$150 million over the past month. Labor has fully backed the expenditure, including the provision of weaponry to Ukraine's military and its associated fascist militias.

Albanese, having joined hands with Morrison, then presented his budget reply. In another display of bipartisanship, many of the government's budget measures were passed through parliament the night before with Labor's support. The budget includes major cuts to healthcare, education and other key areas of social spending, while providing a bonanza for the military and intelligence agencies.

The Labor leader stressed that he was not outlining an

"alternative budget." Instead he was providing a "vision." And an exceedingly vague "vision" it was, with hardly any concrete details, costings or new policies.

"In this increasingly uncertain and unstable world, we will need to increase Australia's defence spending," Albanese said. The government and Labor have already earmarked military expenditure of more than half a trillion dollars this decade, indicating the vast sums that will be involved in the further increases promised by Albanese.

To the extent that he criticised the government, it was for making too many announcements and not enough policies that "actually improve technology and capabilities" for the military machine. Like the government, Albanese has promised that defence spending will be at least two percent of gross domestic product under a Labor government. He has backed the plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, while urging the government to fit tomahawk missiles to the existing submarine fleet in the interim.

The militarist agenda abroad was combined with an unalloyed pitch to business at home. It was necessary to "build a stronger economy" by bringing together "Family businesses and workers, big employers and unions, states and the Commonwealth."

The key issue was to boost "productivity," a phrase Albanese used no less than seven times. This is code for the stepped-up economic restructuring and attacks on the handful of remaining workplace conditions that the financial press has been clamouring for over the past two years.

Albanese invoked the legacy of the Hawke and Keating governments, which deregulated the economy, floated the dollar and presided over the destruction of whole sections of industry in the 1980s and 90s. He hailed the Rudd-Gillard governments, in which he was a leading MP. In office between 2007 and 2013, they implemented market-based "reforms" that further eviscerated public healthcare, education and welfare. Gillard aligned Australia with the vast US military-build up in the Asia-Pacific, directed against China.

The record showed that "It is only Labor that ever does the big reforms," Albanese declared. These were crucial for

“economic growth.” This was the essence of his speech: an appeal to big business that Labor would be best placed to implement its austerity and pro-market demands.

One of the few concrete references he made to previous Labor policies was Gillard’s National Disability Insurance Scheme, which has forced thousands of disabled people off their benefits, while turning the sector over to private corporations.

Albanese rehashed previous policy announcements that are little more than handouts to big business.

This includes a “powering Australia” plan for major subsidies to the energy monopolies and the promotion of the lucrative market for renewables. Albanese stressed that this program has been endorsed by the Business Council of Australia. A “future made in Australia” initiative will hand money to large industries, without doing anything to reverse the massive decline in manufacturing.

Labor recognised that “Education is the biggest and most powerful weapon we have against disadvantage,” Albanese proclaimed. He did not outline a single policy that would restore the billions stripped from the sector by consecutive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

“Every Australian should be able to access and afford the health care they need,” Albanese intoned. He did not pledge a cent to the public healthcare system, which has repeatedly been brought to the verge of collapse by the pandemic. Nothing was outlined for nurses, or other health workers, who are saddled with miserable wages and increasingly intolerable working conditions.

The Labor leader presented the pandemic as a thing of the past, scarcely referencing it. Australia is in the midst of a renewed surge, with the BA.2 variant spreading out of control after the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, ended all safety measures to ensure there are no disruptions to corporate activities. The more than 3,000 people who have died from COVID this year, and the four million others who have been infected, did not rate a mention.

“This agenda isn’t radical,” Albanese emphasised. “My team and I are promising renewal not revolution.” Albanese became Labor leader after the party’s 2019 election debacle. He pledged to end any populist condemnations of inequality and even empty threats to impose limited taxation measures on the immense wealth of the billionaires and big business. Instead Albanese has insisted that Labor is the party of “aspiration.”

The headline measure in the budget reply epitomised its fraudulent character. Labor would put “security, dignity, quality and humanity back into aged care.”

Even on their face, the measures are incredibly meagre given the horror stories of neglect in aged care homes throughout the country and the mass COVID deaths that have occurred in them during the pandemic.

Labor would mandate that each facility have a registered nurse on site at all times. It would “work with” the major

private companies that dominate aged care to develop “nutritional standards.” And it would deliver entirely unspecified “new funding, more staff and better support to the aged care sector.”

Nothing would be done to reverse the privatisation of aged care, which has driven the decline in care and the extortionate sums charged to families. The opening up of the industry to the full force of the market was initiated by the Hawke and Keating governments that Albanese pledges to emulate.

In the most hyped announcement, Albanese declared that Labor will “support the workers’ call for better pay at the Fair Work Commission [FWC].” The pro-business commission, established by the last Labor government with the support of the unions, has presided over the suppression of wage growth at or beneath three percent per annum since its establishment. To those familiar with its activities, the pledge to support wage growth through the FWC can only sound like a twisted joke.

Such was the case with Albanese’s many other references to the cost of living crisis and wage suppression. While denouncing the government’s paltry cash handouts as an election ploy, Albanese did not announce a single policy that would address soaring prices or declining income.

His comments about wages were little more than warmed-over “trickle down” economics, associated with the most right-wing free marketeers. The government, business, workers and unions would come together “co-operating to boost productivity and increase profits and wages.” As every worker knows, amid a deepening economic crisis, the main way businesses are “boosting productivity” and “increasing profits” is by slashing wages and attacking conditions.

That will be the key plank of a Labor government: a stepped-up offensive against the working class, to be enforced by the corporatised trade unions, alongside militarism and war abroad. Albanese’s repeated references to “renewal not revolution” and his insistence that all must “come together” hint at Labor’s recognition that this bipartisan program will provoke major social struggles by the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**