

Australian election features jobs fraud

Mike Head
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Having begun with a lie about 40,000 lives being “saved” during the COVID-19 pandemic, the second day of the campaign for the May 21 federal election in Australia featured another fabrication: that of “jobs growth” and a record low unemployment rate.

Both Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese sought to hide the reality facing millions of workers, especially young workers, which will worsen as soon as the election is over.

That is, increasingly insecure and low-paid jobs, with growing numbers having to work multiple jobs to try to make ends meet, confronting soaring prices for petrol, rent, childcare, fresh food and other essentials, and rising mortgage interest rates on record levels of household debt.

These are the kinds of jobs that Morrison intended when he promised to “create” 1.3 million jobs over the next five years. This is an even greater fraud than at the last election in 2019, when his government pledged to create 1.25 million jobs over five years. That claim was shattered by the pandemic.

The issue of unemployment came up at a press conference earlier this week, where Albanese could not name the 4 percent official unemployment rate, or the central bank’s interest cash rate of 0.1 percent, or the price of petrol.

His fumbling response undoubtedly expressed Labor’s indifference towards the conditions confronting working-class households. But the media is using such “fact checking” and trivia exercises as a diversion from the real issues.

The truth, covered up by Albanese, Morrison and the corporate media, is that the low jobless rate is false, the near-zero interest rates are about to be lifted and the price of petrol will go back over \$2 a litre in a few months’ time, regardless of whether Labor or the Coalition heads the next government.

The 4 percent unemployment rate boasted by the government for February disguises the real situation. The Bureau of Statistics (ABS) counts only those not working more than an hour a fortnight. Another 6.6 percent of workers were classified as “underemployed”—that is actively seeking more hours of work. That took the total “underutilised” to around 1.5 million workers.

The government’s own statistics show that 949,940 people—nearly a million—were relying on sub-poverty line Newstart or Youth Allowance unemployment benefits in February. That is almost double the 563,300 counted as unemployed!

Even this hides the reality. The Roy Morgan polling company estimated the true jobless figure at 8.5 percent or 1.2 million workers in February, plus “underemployment” of 7.8 percent or 1.12 million workers. That totals 16.3 percent, or 2.35 million workers seeking work or more work.

Another factor in the artificially low official jobless data is the absence of overseas workers. Before COVID-19, more than 2 million temporary migrants accounted for up to 10 percent of the Australian workforce, mostly in sectors such as construction, healthcare and hospitality.

Morrison’s government, backed by the Labor Party, is reopening the international border to allow the return of this cheap labour force, together with international students, backpackers and Pacific labourers who have arrived in recent weeks, despite the resurgence of COVID-19 illnesses.

All the predictions, by the Coalition and Labor alike, of “recovery” and “jobs” are bogus. They are based on stifling workers’ opposition and wage demands, and pushing more workers into poorly-paid and insecure work, while intensifying the drive to “reopen” the economy by dismantling all pandemic safety measures.

This drive is already well underway. Other ABS data

shows that the number of “multiple job holders”—those working at least two jobs to try to survive—rose by 13.1 percent to a new record of 867,000 in the last quarter of 2021. The number of these “secondary” jobs rose to a record 954,000, with some workers having to take three, four or more jobs. That is the reality of the “jobs growth” promised by both the Coalition and Labor.

This is only part of a wider picture. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) released a report on Monday estimating that 4.15 million workers are in insecure work, including casual work, labour hire, gig economy workers and those on fixed-term contracts. That represents one worker in three.

But what the ACTU report did not say is how this has been imposed. That is because the trade unions, working closely with successive governments, have policed the employers’ offensive by straitjacketing workers in the enterprise bargaining system and its anti-strike laws.

In fact, the biggest leap in this process began under the prices and incomes Accord partnership established by the unions with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996. Between 1988 and 1996, casualisation rates jumped from 19 percent of workers to 26 percent, according to Parliamentary Library research.

The growth of insecure work continued under the Rudd and Gillard governments from 2007 to 2013, again enforced by the unions through the Fair Work Australia laws, which cemented the ban on nearly all industrial action. Over three decades, from 1992 to today, full-time permanent employment has fallen from 70.4 percent to 61 percent.

Labor, no less than the Liberal-Nationals, has ensured that the lives of those thrown onto the unemployment scrap heap a misery. Labor governments effectively froze the miserly unemployment payments for years while in office.

Andrew Leigh, Labor’s shadow assistant treasurer and himself a wealthy businessman, declared this week that Labor has no intention of lifting the sub-poverty JobSeeker rate. Leigh also walked back an earlier promise for an “independent inquiry” into the issue of an increase. His comments, unlike Albanese’s “gaffe” on the unemployment rate, hardly received any scrutiny in the press.

The record underscores the necessity for the socialist

alternative being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in this election. Labor and the unions do not represent the interests of the working class. They are pledged, in Albanese’s words, to pro-business “wealth creation” policies that mean ramping up the rate of exploitation of workers.

The SEP is urging the creation of rank-and-file committees throughout workplaces, schools and working-class communities, as the means to break out of the shackles of the unions and advance workers’ demands.

These demands would include a full-time, permanent job on decent wages and conditions for all who are able to work, a living wage for those unable to work, and a vast expansion of public works to provide jobs and repair the damage done by decades of funding cuts to the public health and education systems.

The wealth and resources exist for such a program of action, but they must be taken out of the hands of the corporate elite. That means fighting for a workers’ government to nationalise the banks, finance houses and major corporations under the democratic control of the working class.

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