

Australian Labor Party's election launch pitches for corporate backing on restructuring and war

Mike Head, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Senate in Queensland

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Amid a deepening political crisis, reflected in historic low levels of support for the ruling parties, the Australian Labor Party's formal election campaign launch yesterday reiterated Labor's appeal to the financial elite as the only party able to impose a new barrage of pro-market measures and prepare for war.

After three weeks of diversionary mud-slinging and lying campaigning by all the parties of the political establishment for the May 21 national election, media opinion polls provide a limited picture of the mounting discontent in the working class, which is fuelling strikes by teachers, health workers and aged care workers.

According to the latest May 1 Resolve poll published by Nine Media outlets, voting support for Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition is languishing at about one-third for each, with the other third leaning toward the Greens and "other" parties. Nearly a quarter of all these voters said they were "uncommitted," adding to the likelihood of a "hung" parliament and an unstable minority government.

The official campaign is addressing none of the burning issues facing millions of working people—the accelerating cost of living, mass COVID-19 infections and the escalating danger of Australian involvement in a new world war instigated by the US.

This is intensifying the political disaffection produced by decades of deteriorating living standards and social conditions, presided over by Labor and Coalition governments alike, assisted by the pro-business trade unions, which have suppressed working class struggles since the 1980s.

Under these conditions and behind the fatuous slogan of "A better future," Labor leader Anthony Albanese made an appeal to the ruling class for support. Long abandoned is Labor's phoney 2019 election rhetoric of offering a "fair go" for working people.

Albanese declared that Labor governments were the only ones that "drive the big changes" and "reshape the economy," while accusing the Coalition government of committing a "foreign policy failure" by allowing the small Pacific island state of Solomon Islands to sign a security treaty with China.

Despite still recovering from a week-long COVID infection himself, and addressing a front row of Labor luminaries who have been similarly infected, Albanese said not one word about the pandemic that is gripping schools and other workplaces, as well as aged care homes, and constantly threatening the most vulnerable members of society.

Albanese's only reference was to defend the bipartisan ending, by all Australia's governments, of pandemic safety precautions. He insisted that such measures were "not an option for the challenges ahead" because "economic competition doesn't stop at national borders."

This invocation of global "economic competition" underscores the corporate profit-driven character of Labor's continued intent to pursue the deadly "live with the virus" offensive that has struck down teachers and students, and spread throughout working-class areas. Nothing must stand in the way of pushing workers into unsafe workplaces to boost profitability so that employers can "compete" on world capitalist markets.

Cynically, Labor held its campaign launch in Perth, the Western Australian capital. It is hoping to cash in on the supposed popularity of Premier Mark McGowan, who led Labor to a landslide state election victory in March 2021 by promising to keep the population safe from COVID-19.

Albanese began his speech by thanking McGowan "for all you've done to keep WA safe and strong." Yet, less than a year after retaining office, McGowan's government joined the rest of the governments, united in the bipartisan "National Cabinet," in scrapping virtually all safety measures.

Up until the end of last year, WA had recorded just 1,158 COVID-19 infections and 9 deaths. Now, after Labor reopened the state's border on March 3, more than 400,000 people have contracted the virus in WA, and 148 have died.

This is part of a national and global disaster, fuelled by the mutating Omicron and other COVID-19 variants. After being initially compelled by working-class opposition to adopt policies to mitigate the virus, Australian governments have junked all precautions. As a result, more than 7,250 people have died from COVID-19, three-quarters of them since

December. More than 6 million people have been infected according to official figures, which vastly understate the real spread of the virus.

As for keeping WA “strong,” the state’s economy depends heavily on iron ore and other raw materials exports, overwhelmingly to China. All of this is threatened by the US drive to prevent China from challenging its global hegemony, with Australia increasingly on the front line of the conflict as a base for US warships, planes, troops and spy satellite facilities.

Albanese underlined Labor’s backing for the US-led confrontation with China by charging the Coalition government with “failure” in Solomon Islands, which has incurred the ire of the Biden administration, and pledging to be a government that would invest in “real defence capabilities.” Throughout the election campaign, Labor has vowed to outdo the government in the rapid acquisition of long-range missiles and other weaponry—a vow that will add untold billions to the \$600 billion already allocated for military spending during the current decade.

In the same vein, Albanese’s speech was again saturated with reactionary nationalism, emphasising “national security” and a “stronger” and “more self-reliant” economy. That means working hand-in-glove even more intensively with the corporatist unions to subordinate workers to the profit dictates of Australian-based big business, pitting them against their fellow workers across Asia and internationally.

For that purpose, Albanese sought to invoke a false national unity, under conditions in which the pandemic has vastly further widened the gulf between the tiny wealthy elite that has profited from the disaster and the working people who are bearing the brunt of it.

A Labor government would “bring people together,” including “workers, big employers and trade unions, states and the Commonwealth.” That is a pledge to reprise, under much more dire conditions, the role of the previous Hawke and Keating, and Rudd and Gillard, Labor governments in partnering with the unions to shackle workers, via anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws, to the requirements of “their” employers.

Albanese paid homage to Keating and Rudd, who were given pride of place at the event, as two leaders who “left lasting legacies” that “changed Australia for the better.” He credited them with creating compulsory superannuation, the National Broadband Network and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

These schemes, all based on the capitalist market system, have further enriched the financial aristocracy and corporate service providers, at the expense of working class households and people with disabilities, who face brutal service cuts.

There was virtually nothing new in Albanese’s speech that even purported to address the social crisis of sky-rocketing inflation, declining real wages, and housing unaffordability. There were no promises of increased spending on the

chronically under-funded public health, aged care and education systems.

A Labor government would reduce the cost of medication on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme by \$12.50, but that would still leave workers paying up to \$30 for essential medicines.

A “Help To Buy” scheme would see the government buy an equity stake of up to 40 percent in 10,000 newly-purchased homes annually, allowing eligible people to take out mortgages with only 2 percent deposits. This is a drop in the bucket compared to the housing crisis, and would only help inflate prices.

Far from offering a “better future,” the next government, whether led by Labor or the Coalition, will seek to make the working class pay for the trillion-dollar public debt incurred by bailing out companies in the pandemic and pouring funds into the hands of the military.

There is only one party standing in this election to address the pressing needs of working people—the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP’s election statement advances a socialist program of action for workers to fight for their class interests against the relentless assault on their basic social and democratic rights.

The SEP is urging workers to form independent organisations of working class struggle, rank-and-file committees, in every workplace and neighbourhood, to break out of the straitjacket of Labor and the pro-capitalist unions.

Workers must take control of production and resources, in order to fundamentally reorganise society to meet the needs of all. That means placing the banks, finance houses and major corporations under social ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

A workers’ government has to be established to restructure society along these socialist lines as part of the fight for socialism internationally. We urge our readers to study and circulate our election statement and apply to join the SEP to build the leadership for this historic struggle.

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