Australian Labor leader Anthony Albanese pitches to big business at Chamber of Commerce

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The official campaign for the Australian election on May 21 has been dominated by diversion, mind-numbing banalities and personality politics befitting a poorly-written television soap opera on the part of Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the corporate media.

Behind the rubbish that is being served up to the population is another campaign. Both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition are pitching themselves to the financial elite. The real contest is over which is best placed to implement sweeping cuts to education, healthcare and social spending, and to intensify decades of pro-business restructuring aimed at boosting the profits of the corporations and the fortunes of the ultra-wealthy at the direct expense of working people.

This latter campaign was on full display in an address by Labor leader Anthony Albanese to the Australian Chamber of Commerce last Thursday.

Albanese, knowing that his remarks would be released online and reported in the media, repeated his guff about the need for "wage growth" and "social inclusion." In reality, Labor has not outlined a single policy to boost pay, and has allocated a pittance to health, education and social spending.

The real message of Albanese's speech—that Labor would carry out sweeping "economic reform" in the interests of the corporations and a stepped-up onslaught on working-class conditions—would not have been lost on the gathering of CEOs, business executives and industry chiefs.

As has been the case throughout the campaign, Albanese criticised the Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison from the right.

He did not condemn the profit-driven "let it rip" COVID policies, which have resulted in millions of infections this year and more than 5,000 deaths, because Labor fully backs them. Nor did Albanese differ with the cuts to healthcare and education contained in the pre-election federal budget, or the massive "stage three tax cuts" for the ultra-wealthy, all of which Labor supports.

Instead, Albanese denounced the government for presiding over a "doubling of debt before the pandemic even reached our shores." The Coalition government of the past decade had been characterised by "inertia" and had "no agenda for reform."

Albanese used the word "reform" as it is employed by corporate executives, not as it was previously understood. In decades gone by, reforms were measures that improved the social lot of working people. In today's official parlance, "reforms" are measures that strip away the few rights and conditions that workers' retain, intensify exploitation and boost profits.

Albanese made this plain, using the term "productivity," the catch cry of the corporate elite for a stepping-up of such policies, no less than 32 times.

The Labor leader declared: "The Liberals shamelessly banked Labor's structural reforms—nearly a decade and a half of tireless work—while devoting the last decade to simply spending the dividends of those economic improvements." Now it was necessary to return to the "big reforms" that "only Labor does."

Albanese's lauding of Labor's record is a warning of what his party would do if it formed office. Labor, and Albanese himself, is responsible for sweeping attacks on the working class that have created the present social crisis. He declared: "As a young man, I witnessed the Hawke-Keating reforms. I contributed to the Rudd-Gillard reforms as a Minister."

The Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, in office from 1983 to 1991, had "invented the Labor model for inclusive growth, based on convictions that were new and bracing for the Labor Party at the time," Albanese declared. At the centre of this project was "the conviction in private wealth and private reward, combined with a devotion to the social wage and public progress."

Albanese hailed Hawke and Keating for developing a "new model." He sought to differentiate this from the "neo-liberal" model implemented by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan during the 1980s, with vague references to the "social wage" and Labor's purported commitment to "inclusion."

But in reality, the Hawke-Keating governments implemented regressive social policies that were identical to the far-right Republican and Tory administrations in the United States and Britain.

Albanese spelt this out, declaring that Hawke and Keating had "built an Australian economy" that guaranteed "for the first time, a completely open competitive international economy with a full external orientation" and "completely open domestic financial markets." That is, Labor engaged in sweeping economic deregulation, removing any imposts or barriers to the profit-making activities of the banks and the corporations.

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They had floated the dollar in a move aimed at "relentlessly protecting national competitiveness." That is, the measure was aimed at ensuring that Australian businesses were competitive with their counterparts internationally by promoting continuous pro-business workplace restructuring aimed at driving down costs. At the same time, Labor had introduced "a tax system which dramatically cut personal rates of taxation."

Albanese's "highlights" list was couched in the vague and impersonal language of business management. But these measures had definite social consequences. They cleared the way for the destruction of whole sections of industry that were considered to be not sufficiently "internationally competitive."

Hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed in steel, on the ports, across manufacturing and throughout industry. Whole sections of the working class were thrown onto the scrapheap, while working-class suburbs centering around manufacturing and industry were beset with social crisis and misery that continues and deepens.

The agenda was implemented by Hawke and Keating in partnership with the thoroughly corporatised trade unions through the Accord, a pact between government, business and unions, which enforced the mass sackings, suppressed widespread opposition and smashed-up all independent forms of working-class organisation, such as shop stewards' committees.

Albanese also boasted that Hawke and Keating had introduced "productivity-driving enterprise bargaining that delivered real wage growth." The first half of the statement is true, the second half a lie. Enterprise bargaining, brought in by Keating and the unions in the 1990s, divided workers up, business by business. It facilitated one sell-out enterprise agreement after another, driving down pay to historic lows and creating the wage growth crisis that Albanese occasionally bemoans.

The references to "inclusive growth" are no less a sham. The Hawke-Keating years witnessed the biggest fall in labour's share of gross domestic product in the post-war period, a trend that has also continued.

Albanese similarly hailed the Rudd-Gillard governments that were in office from 2007 to 2013. They had resumed the "reform agenda" by creating the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This has outsourced services and forced tens of thousands of people off the disability pension and into low-paid work or onto the sub-poverty unemployment allowance.

Rudd and Gillard had introduced "needs-based schools funding," which obliterated the distinction between private and public schools, allowing for billions more to be handed to the former while working-class schools were hit by continuous funding cuts. This was part of a broader onslaught on education and health, with Labor introducing "reforms" in both sectors aimed at opening them up more fully to the demands of the capitalist market.

Albanese declared: "We must rediscover the spirit of consensus that Bob Hawke used to bring together governments, trade unions, businesses and civil society around their shared aims of growth and job creation." Labor would "simplify" enterprise bargaining in line with the demands of big business for an end to red tape and regulations when they are collaborating with the unions in the further destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

Labor would "back Australian business" and ensure the focus of enterprise bargaining was on "productivity" gains, i.e. increased profitability. Albanese boasted that Labor's climate policies, including state subsidies for renewables, were backed by the largest businesses and the Chamber of Commerce itself. Labor will continue to open new coal mines and other fossil fuel emitters, while ensuring that energy corporations have access to the lucrative renewables market.

Albanese remained vague on the other policies Labor would implement. But his speech provided a more accurate picture of what is on the agenda, whichever party forms government, than the various diversionary and lying statements directed toward the public.

The incoming government will be tasked by business and the International Monetary Fund with carrying out sweeping cuts to social spending to pay down the national debt, and an onslaught on wages and conditions to ensure corporate profitability deepening global economic turmoil.

Albanese's speech highlights the need for the working class to break with Labor and the unions, and strike out on a new path, which rejects the dictatorship of big business and the banks that they uphold. That alternative is the fighting socialist program of action advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in our election campaign.

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