

Australian unions promote illusions Labor will reverse wage decline

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In the lead up to this Saturday's federal election, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has claimed in a series of press releases that Scott Morrison's Liberal-National government is solely responsible for declining real wages, soaring house prices, increasing workplace fatalities and the growth of insecure work.

This campaign is aimed at whitewashing the role of the Labor Party and the unions themselves in the decades-long assault on the working class and promoting illusions that these issues can be resolved at the ballot box on Saturday.

This cynical exercise is an intensification of the role played by the unions in every election. The purpose is to suppress any independent political activity in the working class and subordinate workers to the task of electing another pro-business Labor government.

Australia's unions are now urging workers to support Labor's most right-wing election campaign in recent memory. Labor is in lockstep with the Coalition on the homicidal "let it rip" COVID-19 strategy, and the major parties are battling over which will be most aggressive in preparing for US-led confrontations with Russia and China. At the same time, Labor leader Anthony Albanese is pitching the party to the corporate boardrooms as the party most capable of implementing their demands for increased "productivity."

The Labor leader last week walked back an earlier comment supporting a 5.1 percent increase to the minimum wage, in line with the current official rate of inflation. Reacting to criticism from big business, Albanese quickly made clear that a Labor government would not back such an increase, but would "welcome" such a decision by the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the wage-cutting tribunal established by the last Labor government.

The ACTU is attempting to convince workers that, despite Albanese's pro-business, pro-war campaign, they should support Labor because the unions can be relied upon to pressure an Albanese government. This is entirely false. The unions are every bit as committed to the pro-business agenda as is Labor.

The ACTU revised its submission to the FWC wage review earlier this month, increasing its annual wage increase claim from 5 percent to just 5.5 percent. That is far below the actual

soaring cost of essential household items, which has hit 6.6 percent and is still accelerating.

Abandoning any pretence that its claim would leave workers better off, ACTU secretary Sally McManus said the amended figure "is what is now needed to ensure people tread water."

In other words, both Labor and the unions are opposed to an increase in real wages for workers, even those earning the minimum rate of \$20.33 an hour.

Albanese has vowed that a Labor government he leads will emulate the policies of the Hawke-Keating era, from 1983 to 1996. Working closely with the ACTU, Labor struck a series of Accords with the unions to impose sweeping pro-market restructuring and repressive industrial relations laws, as demanded by the financial and corporate elite.

That included the establishment of the enterprise bargaining system, which isolates workers and ties them to the interests of individual employers, and outlaws all industrial action except during narrow union-controlled "bargaining" periods every three or four years. This process has destroyed tens of thousands of jobs and set off a decline in workers' share of income that has continued ever since.

Albanese has also pointed to the legacy of Rudd-Gillard Labor government, which further sharpened the assault on the working class with the passage of the "Fair Work Act" and establishment of the FWC, again with the full support of the unions.

Labor and the unions have used this legislation to shut down all opposition by workers to a decades-long corporate assault on wages, jobs and working conditions.

Enterprise agreements (EAs), brokered and then imposed by the unions in dispute after dispute over decades, have been one of the primary means through which corporations and governments, state and federal, have enforced massive cost cutting at the expense of the working class.

In this manner, the unions have enforced sub-inflationary "raises," wage freezes and even outright pay cuts, along with sweeping attacks on working conditions, including shift allowances and overtime pay.

Just last month, the Electrical Trades Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union—all major ACTU

affiliates—pushed through a four-year EA covering their members at WA News in Western Australia.

These workers were locked out for ten weeks by the company ahead of a planned 24-hour stoppage that was part of the unions' limited campaign. The three unions involved, with many thousands of members in key sectors of the economy, did not organise any industrial action in support of the locked-out workers. Instead, they brokered an outcome in line with the company's demands.

The EA deal includes 2 percent annual pay “increases” over the four-year life of the agreement—well below the cost of living—as well as cuts to redundancy entitlements and other conditions. The unions declared the result a “win” for the workers involved.

Equally rotten was an agreement pushed through by the Maritime Union of Australia last year at Victoria International Container Terminal's automated port in Melbourne. The deal provided an average pay increase across the workforce of 13.6 percent over four years, little more than 3 percent per annum, and included a ten-year ban on “illegal” industrial action.

These are just two among countless examples of the role the unions have played for decades as the industrial police force of management. The Reserve Bank of Australia reported in February that, in the December quarter last year, more than 60 percent of businesses either had a wage freeze in place or expected to put one in place in coming months.

This is a direct product of the actions of the unions. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as tens of thousands of jobs were axed, unions delayed EA negotiations in industry after industry, preventing workers from striking. McManus and the unions were instrumental in drafting the “JobKeeper” wage subsidy, which handed billions of dollars to major corporations while granting employers sweeping powers to slash workers' hours and alter their working conditions.

The unions consistently opposed lockdowns and other public health measures and were at the forefront of the reopening drive, now responsible for more than six million infections in Australia and more than 5,000 deaths this year alone.

Whatever their rhetoric, the unions' role is not to lead a push for genuine wage increases, but to prevent them, in order to meet the never-ending demands of the employers for “international competitiveness.”

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the election, whatever the result, will resolve nothing. Whichever major party takes office will continue and deepen the assault on the working class, in order to recoup the massive handouts given to big business during the pandemic and finance the rapidly accelerating war drive against Russia and China.

There *is* an alternative to austerity, pandemic and war, but it will not be realised within the framework of the capitalist system and its political servants, including the unions, Labor and the Greens.

The SEP is the only party standing in the federal election

advancing a socialist program of action for the working class. The SEP's demands include:

- An immediate rise in all pay to compensate for past erosion. Index all wages to the current cost of living and introduce an automatic monthly cost of living adjustment to keep pace with rising expenses.
- A full-time, permanent job on decent wages and conditions for all who want one.
- An end to the super-exploitation of young people as cheap casual and contract labor.
- Mandatory public health measures in every workplace to help stamp out COVID. Workers, not management, must decide what is safe.

To fight for this program requires a complete break with corporatised trade unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, school and community.

Through a network of these new organisations, workers can take up a global struggle to end capitalism and reorganise society along socialist lines. This includes placing major industries and banks under democratic workers' control and expropriating the obscene riches of the oligarchs.

Only in this way can the working class end the decades-long assault on wages, jobs and conditions, and ensure that the vast wealth generated by workers is used to serve the needs of all of humanity.

These rank-and-file committees can form the basis for a workers' government to implement a socialist program. The SEP is ready to provide political assistance to workers wanting to establish such committees.

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