

Australian Labor PM unveils “disciplined” ministry for war and austerity

Mike Head
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Far from marking a new dawn of “diversity” and “inclusiveness,” the cabinet and outer ministry announced by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese yesterday, and sworn into office today, will sharply intensify the agenda of the defeated Liberal-National Coalition government of Scott Morrison on both major fronts: alignment behind US wars and deep attacks on working-class living and working conditions.

Intense efforts being made by Labor and the corporate media to dress up the new government in the identity politics clothes of greater representation of women, indigenous people and a range of ethnic backgrounds are a threadbare mask. The reality is that there is no political or class “diversity” in the ministry, which was hand-picked by Labor’s factional powerbrokers.

To a man and woman, they are unanimously committed to the program laid out for the Labor government by the Biden administration in the US and by the Australian and global financial elite.

It is no accident that the government’s very first actions after the ministers are officially anointed today will be to convene meetings of the cabinet’s National Security Committee and Expenditure Review Committee.

The first committee will focus on how to step up Australia’s role in the escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the ratcheting up of the accompanying confrontation with China. That task has begun already, with Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong travelling to Tokyo last week to join the anti-China Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit. Wong then quickly embarked on a mission to the South Pacific to warn island states of “consequences” if they signed deals with China.

The second committee, usually dubbed the “razor gang,” will plan the imposition of another wave of pro-business economic restructuring and the slashing of social spending to make the working class pay for the massive budget deficits and debt incurred by propping up big business throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

That offensive also began last week, with a barrage of declarations by Treasurer Jim Chalmers and Finance Minister Katy Gallagher that “dire” budgetary pressures required “sacrifices,” including in health care, aged care and disability services.

In remarks that were buried by the media, Albanese told the first caucus meeting of Labor parliamentarians that they must show “discipline, unity [and] a sense of purpose.” That is, there must be no chinks in their resolve in implementing this reactionary, right-wing agenda.

Albanese also praised the “trade union movement” for its support. That underscores the extent to which the Labor government will depend on the unions to suppress workers’ opposition to the rising militarism and ongoing cuts to real wages as the cost of living continues to soar.

That union partnership with the government and the employers will be cemented by another central plank in Labor’s policy: the convening of a “summit” to reinforce a unified front against workers’ struggles over wages, workloads and conditions which have erupted already among nurses, health and aged care workers, teachers, university staff, bus drivers and public sector workers.

Three announcements underlined the Albanese government’s unequivocal alignment behind the wars being provoked by US imperialism to reassert, against Russia, China and any other targeted rivals, the global hegemony it won through World War II.

The first was the appointment of Labor’s deputy leader Richard Marles, who has close connections to the US military-intelligence apparatus, as defence minister. That is a key post in implementing the massive increase in military spending and war readiness required under last year’s AUKUS pact with the US and UK governments, featuring the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles.

The second was Albanese’s refusal, also buried in the media, to answer a journalist’s question about Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder. An Australian citizen, Assange has been effectively incarcerated for more than a

decade and faces extradition to the US for exposing the war crimes, mass surveillance, regime-change operations and other abuses committed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The journalist cited previous reports that Albanese had once said, behind closed doors, that “enough is enough” on the US espionage charges against Assange, and asked: “As Prime Minister, is it now your position that the US should be encouraged to drop the charges against Mr Assange? And have you made any representations to that effect?”

Albanese contemptuously dismissed the question, declaring: “My position is that not all foreign affairs is best done with the loud hailer.”

Like the last Labor government of Julia Gillard, which declared Assange to be a criminal, this one will do everything it can to assist the White House to silence him for good, all the more because of the new war crimes being launched by the US and its partners. Labor will keep working hand-in-glove with the Biden administration despite the widespread working-class support for Assange, as shown again by the warm response to the Socialist Equality Party’s election campaign demand for his immediate freedom.

The third announcement was that Albanese and Wong will next week undertake another mission, this time to Indonesia. President Joko Widodo’s administration has strengthened economic ties with China and last year criticised the AUKUS pact, on which it was not consulted, saying it endangered Southeast Asia’s nuclear-free zone. Widodo, like Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, also has not lined up behind the US war on Russia.

Domestically, despite now claiming a bare majority of 77 seats in the 151-member House of Representatives, and therefore a supposed “clear mandate” from voters, Albanese will not convene parliament until late July, more than two months after the election. That did not stop him urging his ministers to not “waste a single day in office” in implementing the government’s program.

Treasurer Chalmers reiterated the government’s cost-cutting plans, declaring the need to “trim spending.” He said he would make a statement to parliament at the end of next month laying out the supposed serious state of the books, which would be used as a basis for spending cuts.

In line with Labor’s pledges to be a government of “wealth creation” and “aspiration,” Chalmers and Albanese again ruled out reversing the planned huge income tax cuts for wealthy households, or imposing any “super profits” taxes on the mining giants.

Significantly, two areas of intense social crisis—aged care and childcare—where Labor had promised, as a major pitch in its election campaign, to address the shocking conditions, low pay and under-staffing in nursing homes, and the

exorbitant costs of childcare, were shunted into the outer ministry.

Control over another crisis area of cuts to support services, that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), was retained by former Labor leader Bill Shorten. Still regarded as a potential leadership challenger to Albanese, Shorten has been handed the task of imposing the demands of the financial elite for deep cuts to the NDIS, along with other social programs.

These demands were spelt out in a May 29 editorial in the *Australian Financial Review*, which insisted: “Labor must reverse-engineer a mandate for fiscal repair.” It said the government had to do much more than just walk back its meagre election promises, such as on aged care, the NDIS and childcare. It had to deflate “public expectations about the ‘free and universal’ things that governments can provide voters.”

With cynical contempt for democracy, let alone the slight improvements pledged by Labor, the editorial declared: “It will take much more than surprise, surprise post-election announcements of the dire budget outlook to properly repair Australia’s tattered fiscal policy.”

The financial newspaper warned that, after making “correct calls” on not taxing the rich, “reverse-engineering a Labor mandate for fiscal repair will not be easy to reconcile with new promises of relief for cost-of-living pressures.”

In other words, the government, its freshly-installed ministers and their trade union enforcers must be prepared to ruthlessly stifle workers’ discontent and hostility as Labor rolls out its pro-business and pro-war measures.

The Socialist Equality Party will be discussing the election outcome and the way forward for the working class at an online public meeting on Sunday, June 12 at 2 p.m. (AEST). Register now to attend this important meeting.



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