

Australian Labor Party conference faces rising discontent over war, austerity and the Voice

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A three-day Australian Labor Party national conference starts in Brisbane tomorrow under the shadow of a deepening political crisis for the Albanese Labor government and the entire political establishment.

In a few set-piece token “debates” inside the conference, echoed in the demonstrations organised by pseudo-left groups outside the event, desperate attempts will be made to claim that pressure can be applied to this increasingly discredited party and government to reverse its total commitment to war and austerity.

Such charades seek to channel rising social and political discontent back into the hands of the government and the parliamentary establishment. That is all the more unconvincing because this conference, the first since 2018, is being staged under a Labor government spearheaded by two leaders of the party’s nominal “Left” faction—Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong.

The Left factional bosses of party and union powerbrokers also hold a majority at the gathering of 402 parliamentarians and top Labor and trade union bureaucrats, and they will ensure there is no real challenge to the government at this event.

Across the country, there is mounting disaffection with the government, which barely scraped into office in May last year, particularly over its escalating commitment to US preparations for a catastrophic war against China and massive military spending. This is compounded by the health system breakdown exposed by the government’s letting loose the COVID pandemic. Labor is also imposing the greatest cost-of-living and housing crisis since World War II, all alongside huge planned income tax cuts for the rich.

This growing hostility, especially among workers and youth, is also feeding into collapsing support for Labor’s signature domestic policy—an effort to divert the social and class tensions into a referendum to entrench an indigenous advisory body, called the Voice, in the 1901 Constitution. The government’s bid to present this new institution as a means of rectifying the appalling social conditions of indigenous people created by 235 years of capitalist rule flies in the face of the financial stress and deteriorating living standards being suffered by the entire

working class, particularly its vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members.

With Labor in office federally and in every state and territory except Tasmania, media polls show rising disillusionment with Albanese and his government, but no real increase in support for the other main establishment party, the openly right-wing Liberal-National Coalition, whose electoral base remains in tatters.

The more the prospect of a disastrous US-led war has loomed and working-class households have faced real wage cuts and soaring prices, rents and mortgage payments, the greater the development of distrust and unrest.

According to a Resolve poll published in the Nine Media outlets yesterday, Albanese’s “net performance rating” plummeted from 16 to 2 percentage points over the past month, and from 35 since January. Labor’s primary vote support fell from 39 to 37 percent over the month, while the Coalition only lifted its primary vote from 30 to 33 percent, leaving 30 percent looking for alternatives.

Correspondingly, support for the Voice dropped from 48 to 46 percent on the Yes or No question that will decide the referendum, continuing a precipitous decline from 63 percent one year ago. This is shattering the efforts of Albanese’s government, backed by the significant sections of big business, to present the Voice as an act of “national unity”—seeking to fashion a new sense of national identity as it ramps up its involvement in making Australia a base for a US war against China.

The government faces the prospect of a damaging referendum defeat, with a vote likely on October 14, just before Albanese flies to Washington for an official visit at the request of US President Joe Biden. Biden will undoubtedly reinforce the message that the White House will tolerate no deviation from the war course.

Albanese’s acceptance of Biden’s invitation underscores the fraud of the closed-door machinations involved in allowing an orchestrated debate at the conference on AUKUS. This top-level US, UK and Australian pact will provide the Australian military with nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range

missiles and other weapons designed for use against China.

A draft motion, authored by New South Wales state Labor MP Anthony D'Adam, proposes to delete a reference to AUKUS in the party's draft platform. Far from being anti-war, the motion accepts the platform's underlying commitment to the US military alliance but objects to AUKUS on a nationalist basis seeking to keep Australian capitalism out of the war.

The political purpose of such motions is to try to head off widespread anti-war sentiment among workers and youth and keep alive illusions that Labor and the unions can be pressured by so-called "lefts" into reversing their pro-war trajectory. D'Adam told the *Australian*: "How AUKUS is dealt with at the conference will establish whether there remains a genuine left wing in the Labor Party."

What a farce! The faction leaders have already agreed that the motion will be resoundingly defeated. Conceding this in advance, D'Adam and Marcus Strom, the national convener of the misnamed Labor Against War group, claimed that even getting a motion on the agenda was a victory.

In reality, Albanese doubled down on his government's commitment to AUKUS in his personal foreword to the national platform, declaring: "We are taking carefully thought-out steps forward with AUKUS to strengthen Australia's sovereignty and our region's security."

Having previously insisted on not having a debate on AUKUS at the event, Albanese will seek to use the symbolic display of dissent to satisfy the demands from Washington that his government stand firm against the growing popular opposition to the war plans. Hundreds of billions of dollars are to be spent on AUKUS weaponry at the expense of essential services such as housing, health and cost-of-living relief.

The latest such missive from the Biden administration was delivered on Monday, virtually on the eve of the conference. Kurt Campbell, the Indo-Pacific Coordinator in Biden's National Security Council, used an interview in the *Australian* to declare that the AUKUS pact elevated Australia "into the most rarefied air of America's closest partners."

Campbell, dubbed "Biden's Asia tsar" by the media, added: "AUKUS is a fundamental statement about the future, about confidence to remain strategically aligned and intertwined for decades... It's not an exaggeration to say that AUKUS has fundamentally shifted and accelerated the very course of the US-Australian alliance."

This was a blunt statement of how intensively the Labor government has tied the country's population to preparations for war against China, as well as a warning not to retreat in the face of popular hostility.

In a sign of the government's anxiety over anti-war sentiment, Defence Minister Richard Marles and Defence Industry Pat Conroy lectured party and union members in an online "forum" on Monday night, contemptuously instructing them in how to politically sell AUKUS. Like the party conference itself, this was a tightly-controlled affair, with

participants unable to speak. More than 100 questions were submitted in advance but few were answered.

Revealingly, neither minister uttered the word "war"! Nor did they mention China or the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, in which the Albanese government is heavily involved. Instead, they presented AUKUS as a business and jobs opportunity, effectively touting an economy based on war.

In response to one question, Marles falsely said he could guarantee that Australian-flagged AUKUS submarines would not carry nuclear weapons, yet he admitted that US warships and planes operating out of Australia were almost certainly nuclear-armed, behind a mask of "ambiguity."

Various supposed "left" unions—all of which have imposed sub-inflationary sellout deals on workers—have sponsored draft conference motions to peddle various fantasies. These include that the Labor government could introduce a super-profits tax on big business to finance social housing, scrap the planned "Stage 3" income tax cuts for the wealthy, and take real action on climate change. Whether or not such motions—none of which have any chance of success—make it to the conference floor will depend on factional deals aimed at shoring up the government.

Echoing this illusion-mongering, fake "left" groups such as Socialist Alliance, Socialist Alternative and the Anti-AUKUS Coalition are urging people to join protests outside the conference to promote similar propositions. This line-up only underscores how much is at stake for the ruling class in keeping alive false hopes that the Labor and union apparatus can be reformed or refashioned to change its thoroughly pro-business and pro-war character.

In opposition to this charade, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fighting for an essential political break from the Labor and union machines. This means establishing rank-and-file committees in workplaces to take power out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and fight for the interests of the working class. Above all, we call on workers and youth to join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party needed to overturn the profit system and establish a workers' government to implement socialist policies, as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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