

Australian Labor Party conference endorses AUKUS military pact

Mike Head
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There was much talk in the lead-up to this week's Australian Labor Party conference that "left-wing" delegates would take a stand against the Albanese government's commitment to the AUKUS treaty to acquire US and UK nuclear-powered attack submarines for use against China. Instead, the opposite happened yesterday.

Any pretence of an "anti-AUKUS" push, let alone of opposition to a potentially cataclysmic US-led nuclear war on China, disintegrated. After a highly-orchestrated "debate"—much inflated by the corporate media—AUKUS was cemented into Labor's platform.

According to the media headlines, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese "stared down" the opposition. In reality, his speech was all for show. The key party and union chiefs had already agreed to the adoption of an AUKUS statement.

The 32-paragraph addition to the party's platform endorsed Labor's ramping up of the AUKUS pact, first signed by the previous Morrison Liberal-National government.

An alternative resolution, moved by Electrical Trades Union (ETU) national secretary Michael Wright, was a sham. It merely sought to slightly amend the motion, mainly by eliminating the words "nuclear-powered" and "AUKUS."

The amendments would not have altered the fundamental thrust of the statement, which was to support a military build-up, except for having a fleet of "conventional" submarines, not nuclear-powered ones.

Wright and Labor MP Josh Wilson, who seconded his amendment, emphasised that they sought common ground with the government, to which they pledged their loyalty. After the delegates voted overwhelmingly for the AUKUS resolution, they did not even call for a count.

With no dissent, the entire conference, in which the so-called Left faction had a majority, then voted for the party's foreign policy platform, which declared: "Under Labor, the United States will remain our closest security ally."

Labor's powerbrokers lined up behind two leaders of the "Left," Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who

have spearheaded the government's escalation of the country's involvement in the US war plans.

The AUKUS agreement with the US and UK goes far beyond the allocation of up to \$368 billion for a fleet of submarines, which has generated broad public hostility. AUKUS entrenches a far broader commitment to US war preparations, including the stockpiling of long-range missiles and US access to land, air and naval bases across Australia. This makes the country a platform for war against China.

Significantly, the AUKUS resolution formally incorporated the trade unions as key partners in the creation of a war economy. It called for the formation of a government-employer-union "tripartite industry council" to preside over the development of military manufacturing and weapons exports.

The statement declared that a "nuclear-powered submarine capability" was "at the heart of Australia's strategic intent." It was a "contribution to the collective security of our region and to the maintenance of the global rules-based order—so fundamental to Australia's prosperity."

These are code words for backing Washington's intensifying economic, strategic and military offensive against China, which the US ruling class regards as an existential threat to its post-World War II global hegemony. The Australian ruling class has relied on the American "rules-based order" for its own predatory activities in the Indo-Pacific.

The statement echoed the demands issued by the Biden administration for the government to further step up its military spending and bullying of Pacific island states to toe the US line. The latest missive was delivered earlier in the week by Kurt Campbell, the Indo-Pacific coordinator in Biden's National Security Council.

Campbell declared: "It's not an exaggeration to say that AUKUS has fundamentally shifted and accelerated the very course of the US-Australian alliance." It was a bald statement of how far the Albanese government has tied the country's population to the arrangements for war against

China, as well as a public warning not to retreat in the face of popular hostility.

That was why Albanese personally joined the “debate” on the AUKUS statement, just as media commentators had insisted he must do. His intervention was a bid to demonstrate his capacity and that of his government to defy mounting public concern over being placed on the frontline of a war with China. For that he was afforded a standing ovation by the conference delegates.

Albanese reiterated his lifelong support for the US alliance, describing it as a pillar of Labor’s foreign policy, and was “consistent with the Labor values that I have been a part of my whole life.” He boasted that his government had made this relationship “stronger than ever.”

Albanese emphasised Labor’s role as the party of war, having been brought to office in both world wars. Neither he nor any other speaker uttered a word about Labor’s role in either joining or suppressing opposition to the brutal US invasions of Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Likewise, in moving the resolution, Defence Minister Richard Marles declared that “Australians look to Labor” in times of war. He said Labor was “the true party of Australia’s national defence.” By contrast the Liberals were “defence dilettantes.”

Both Marles and Wong, who moved the foreign policy platform, provocatively depicted China as a threat to Australia’s “national security.” Marles accused China of carrying out the “biggest military build-up since World War II.” Wong charged China with “coercion” and “interference” throughout Asia and the Pacific. “That is why we are committed to AUKUS,” she declared.

Marles and Wong also defended the government’s escalating backing for the US-NATO war against Russia and linked that war to the conflict with China. They depicted the reactionary Russian invasion of Ukraine, into which the Putin regime was goaded by the US, as a threat to the world order, including in the Indo-Pacific.

All this turns reality on its head. It is the US that is pursuing aggression against China by imposing crippling economic sanctions, encircling it militarily and provoking conflict over Taiwan, as it did with Russia over Ukraine.

The conference statement said Labor believed that ever-greater integration into the US military “does not involve any ante facto commitment to participate in, or be directed in accordance with, the military operations of any other country.” On the contrary, the transformation of Australia into a base for war makes its involvement in US-led aggression inevitable.

In fact, the statement heightened that danger by declaring that Labor will ensure that Australian ports retain the capacity to host nuclear-powered vessels. US nuclear

submarines and ships are already visiting Australian ports under the AUKUS arrangements.

Albanese and Australian Workers Union national secretary Paul Farrow cynically depicted AUKUS as benefiting workers. The statement claimed that AUKUS would generate 20,000 “unionised jobs,” as well as lucrative business opportunities. It would be a “whole-of-nation effort.” This effectively subordinates workers’ jobs and conditions to the war drive, with the unions cracking the whip.

The statement also insisted that AUKUS would not fuel a nuclear arms race. It said: “Labor will redouble its efforts to strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime, including the NPT [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty].” The NPT, however, is a limited agreement that formally preserves the monopoly over nuclear weapons by the acknowledged nuclear powers, above all the US.

The adoption of the resolution exposes the fraud of the intensive efforts that were made, both inside and outside the conference, to claim that pressure could be applied to the Labor government to repudiate AUKUS. These efforts also sought to divert anti-war sentiment in a nationalist direction, proposing that Australia could isolate itself from a devastating US nuclear war.

Outside the conference yesterday morning, ETU Queensland state secretary Peter Ong addressed a protest attended by about 150 people, standing in front of a banner saying: “No Australian involvement in US led wars.” He ended his speech by calling for the Labor government to “renegotiate” AUKUS, not repudiate it.

Ong was cheered by the pseudo-left supporters present. They share the union bureaucracy’s concern to corral the widespread public hostility to AUKUS back into the hands of the Labor and union apparatuses.

Despite all the Labor and union leaders claiming the AUKUS debate showed that “healthy democracy” existed in the Labor Party, the result was entirely stitched up behind closed doors.

The same basic line-up has occurred on every issue at the stage-managed conference—from retaining income tax cuts for the wealthy to dropping calls for super-profits taxes. But the backing for AUKUS was the most fundamental statement of Labor’s program of war and the imposition of its burdens on the working class.



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