

Australian Labor Party conference adopts platform of war and austerity

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Last week's Australian Labor Party national conference unequivocally committed the party and its trade union apparatus to a program of war against China, and an accompanying class war against the jobs, wages and conditions of workers.

From start to finish, the stage-managed two-and-half day event was a display designed to assure Washington and the Australian capitalist class that the Albanese government and the union bureaucracies are the most dependable vehicle for enforcing the agenda of war and sacrifice on workers and young people.

Significantly, this conference was convened by what is supposedly the most left-wing Labor government in Australia's history. Not only was it spearheaded by the "Left" faction's two most prominent leaders, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong, the Left powerbrokers had a working majority on the conference floor for the first time ever.

This means that, like never before, the corporate and ruling establishment relies directly on the "lefts," who in the past postured, at least to a limited extent, as critics of pro-war and pro-business measures. Now the Left is in power, openly binding itself to impose the dictates of US and Australian imperialism.

The most crucial feature of the gathering was an overwhelming vote, by an uncounted but estimated margin of 80 percent, to endorse the AUKUS military pact. This treaty with the US and Britain is clearly to prepare for a potentially catastrophic US-led war on China to reassert the post-World War II hegemony of American imperialism over the Indo-Pacific and globally.

This commitment was aggressively spelled out by Albanese, Wong and Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles. Boasting of the role of Labor governments in World Wars I and II, Albanese spoke of Labor as the party needed in wartime. "History shows us that in uncertain times, Australia finds its firmest footing with Labor governments," he declared.

Marles accused China of carrying out the "biggest military

build-up since World War II" and said Labor was the party to make the necessary "hard decisions." Wong charged China with "coercion" and "interference" throughout Asia and the Pacific. "That is why we are committed to AUKUS," she declared.

All the pretences that "Left" delegates would take a stand against AUKUS collapsed. The faction bosses ensured a show of support for a 32-paragraph resolution that formally cemented AUKUS at the heart of Labor's policy platform, accompanied by two obligatory standing ovations for Albanese.

The AUKUS statement featured a promise to create 20,000 "unionised" jobs in producing nuclear-powered submarines. This will make the unions the police force for the oppressive conditions that will be implemented in the war industries.

The significance of the AUKUS vote goes far beyond the \$368 billion acquisition of US and British long-range attack submarines. The AUKUS alliance involves ever-more rapidly making Australia a base for war, including stockpiling missiles and expanding access for US military forces across the continent.

To underscore that reality, just two days after the conference ended, the Albanese government today confirmed the \$3 billion purchase of 200 long-range US Tomahawk cruise missiles and other missiles designed for use against China. This weapon package was part of the original AUKUS deal signed by the previous Liberal-National government in September 2021.

The 402 carefully-selected conference delegates—virtually all Labor members of parliament or union officials—met amid rising unrest throughout the working class over the worsening cost-of-living and housing crisis and growing concern about the danger of war and the escalating military spending.

The preoccupation of the entire gathering was with working out the means of stifling and suppressing this opposition via a close partnership between the government and the union bosses, while still trying to corral the discontent back into the hands of the Labor and union

machine.

Albanese set the tone for the conference in his opening speech. Every issue had to be subordinated to the goal of staying in office “long-term.” Labor was the party of “pragmatism” not “protest,” he intoned.

In practice, that means retaining the backing of the US administration and the corporate elite, and silencing dissent. That was why this was the most elaborately-orchestrated Labor conference yet.

Albanese and others claimed there was “healthy,” even “passionate” debate. What a sham! Every resolution and amendment was agreed in advance, including the AUKUS statement. Each speaker was strictly vetted by the faction bosses.

Anticipating protests outside, the event was held behind barricades, with a heavy police presence and extensive security checks. That epitomised the class gulf between the Labor- union apparatus and the working-class households that are already suffering immense financial and social stress as a result of the soaring cost of living and the real wage cuts inflicted by the government and the unions.

Speaking on the economy, Treasurer Jim Chalmers again contemptuously paid lip service to “people doing it tough,” while he and Albanese reassured big business that the government would continue its “responsible fiscal management.” That has included slashing health, education and other social spending to produce the first budget surplus in 15 years, and retaining the planned “Stage Three” income tax cuts for the wealthy, which will cost over \$300 billion in the next decade.

The AUKUS line-up was replicated on every issue at the conference. Each session had government ministers sharing with top union leaders the moving and seconding of resolutions that had been carefully drafted in backroom talks. The entire process highlighted how much the Albanese government, and the ruling class as a whole, depends on the union bureaucracy to deliver its agenda and strangle opposition. Speaker after speaker, beginning with Albanese, hailed “the mighty trade union movement.”

The reliance on the union apparatuses was further underlined by the adoption of motions to form tripartite government-employer-union councils to supervise and ensure profitable conditions in key industries, including the expanded war industries under the AUKUS pact. This means taking the already corporatist role of the unions, established particularly since the Hawke and Keating Labor governments’ Accords with the unions from 1983 to 1996, to a new formal level, especially in the drive to war.

Cynical pre-conference rhetoric by some “left” union chiefs to head off rising working-class disaffection became translated into meaningless amendments. Construction,

Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) national secretary Zach Smith was a prime example. He told his union’s rally of building workers outside the conference that the union was fighting for a super-profits tax to fund the half a trillion dollars needed to overcome the dire shortage of social and affordable housing. Inside the conference, he moved an empty motion proposing “a progressive and sustainable tax system, including corporate tax reform.”

Likewise, there was talk of moving platform amendments to reduce the crippling level of tertiary student HELP fee debts by ending the annual inflation indexation of debts. That became reduced to a worthless call on the Labor government to “work to ensure that studying at university does not shackle young workers with a lifetime of debt.”

Such resolutions only demonstrated that the conference had nothing to offer to workers and young people, just war and sacrifice. In a desperate pitch to appease the rising political unrest, Albanese repeatedly cited Labor’s latest vague slogan “Working for Australia.” It has replaced the now-discredited banner of “A better future” that Labor used to barely scrape into office at the May 2022 election.

The government’s developing political crisis was very evident on its proposed referendum to entrench in the 1901 Constitution an elite indigenous advisory body named the Voice. With media polls showing the referendum heading for defeat, Albanese resorted to exhorting delegates to “campaign like you have never before” for a Yes vote. But the collapse in public support for the big business-backed Voice project over the past year reflects the broader growing disaffection with the Labor government.

There were limited protests outside the conference, despite being promoted by the Greens and pseudo-left groups, as a means of channelling discontent into appeals to the Labor government itself. Such efforts are trying to keep alive dangerous illusions that the Labor and union machine can be refashioned to reverse its totally pro-business and pro-war character.

Instead, the lessons of this conference need to be drawn. What is required is a conscious political break from the entire Labor and union apparatus. That means joining the Socialist Equality Party 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 worldwide.



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