

Australian Labor Party conference calls for “tripartite” integration of unions into industry councils

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Labor’s national conference, held last week in Brisbane, decided to further cement the role of the trade union bureaucracy as a vital component of the government and the capitalist state.

A resolution entitled “Tripartism—Labor at its best” passed without opposition. It declared: “Labor embraces the spirit and the substance of tripartism.” The party vowed to ensure union officials and business representatives sit together on “Government advisory and governance boards,” and have a voice in all “decisions taken by Labor in government which impact upon industry.”

As a blueprint, the resolution cited a recent amendment to the Job and Skills Act, which established a Ministerial Advisory Board, comprising union bureaucrats and corporate representatives, to advise on how best to align education policy with the needs of Australian business.

Significantly, the resolution was sponsored by two of the main “left” union machines. It was moved by Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) national secretary Steve Murphy and seconded by Electrical Trades Union (ETU) national secretary Michael Wright.

Introducing the resolution, Murphy said the unions were offering a simple proposition to the government and big business: “Give us an opportunity to shape how we best respond to the challenges that are in front of us. Don’t let us down and we will return that to you in spades.”

Thus, in exchange for a seat at the boardroom table, the unions are pledging to deliver every big business and government demand for the slashing of jobs, wages and conditions, and suppress the opposition of workers

to these attacks.

The resolution pointed to how broadly the “spirit” of tripartism will be implemented: “Consultation with trade unions is not just restricted to pay and conditions; as the Accord of the Hawke-Keating era showed, but extends to jobs, training, skills, industry, defence, education, health, foreign affairs, and more.”

In other words, Labor’s model for this new era of tripartite collusion is an even deeper and broader assault on the working class. Over the past four decades, the union apparatus has already enforced the wholesale destruction of workers’ conditions to drive up the productivity, profits and “international competitiveness” of Australian capitalism.

The corporatist integration of the unions into business and government is not new. Particularly since the 1983 to 1996 Accords with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, the unions have, in one dispute after another, shut down industrial action and blocked workers’ opposition to sub-inflationary union-management enterprise agreements. Working hand-in-hand with successive Labor governments, including the current one, they have imposed and policed increasingly harsh anti-strike laws.

But the conference’s declaration of Labor’s and the unions’ commitment to more formal collaboration is highly significant. As signalled by the overwhelming vote to entrench the AUKUS military pact in Labor’s policy platform, this is intertwined with the establishment of a war economy.

As another indication, the “left-wing” Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) national secretary Paddy Crumlin hailed Labor’s pledge to establish a “strategic maritime fleet.” He said this was about “integrating the

Australian shipping industry back into the national interest.” Crumlin moved an agreed amendment to specify that the fleet would be “integrated with Defence maritime strategy” and strengthen “Australian supply chain resilience.”

These are preparations for participation in a US-led war against China. As is Labor’s union-backed vow to “rebuild Australian manufacturing.”

Labor’s newly-adopted platform states that this is necessary to “ensure Australia’s supply of vital goods ... secure from disruption and overseas dependence.”

This means imposing even deeper attacks on workers, as war looms, to make Australian capitalism “competitive,” as they pledged in the “Australia Reconstructed” program of the 1980s.

Another amendment, moved by AMWU Western Australian state secretary Steve McCartney, pledged to work with big business and the government to “build a robust and internationally competitive economy” through the establishment of a “tripartite manufacturing council.”

On this council, union officials would be formally involved in subordinating workers to the profit and investment dictates of employers. They would help identify “promising” industries, “develop investment and innovation plans” and “oversee the implementation of these plans, supported by other agencies.”

AMWU Victorian state secretary Tony Mavromatis moved a parallel amendment stipulating that Labor will foster “Australian businesses of all types that can compete on the world stage.”

As a result of union resolutions, Labor also will make adherence to a Secure Australian Jobs Code, entrenching the role of the unions, a condition for all businesses tendering for government contracts. Far from protecting the interests of workers, this will ensure that their fates remain in the hands of the same organisations that have enforced decades of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

Just as escalating plans for war abroad are motivating the deepening of tripartism, so too is the mounting war against the working class at home.

Addressing the conference, Treasurer Jim Chalmers attempted to paint a rosy picture of Labor’s economic achievements since taking office in May last year. But his claims that “our responsible economic management

is working for Australia,” and “wages are moving in meaningful ways” fly in the face of the reality confronted by workers.

Even as Chalmers spoke, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released figures showing an official increase in the unemployment rate from 3.5 to 3.7 percent in July. That is on track to reach 4.5 percent by next year, as intended by the government and the Reserve Bank of Australia as a means of further driving down wages.

Two days earlier, the ABS reported that the Wage Price Index had increased only 3.6 percent in the year ending June, down from 3.7 percent in March, and far short of the official inflation rate of 7 percent. That is a direct result of the union bureaucrats imposing sub-inflationary real wage cuts on workers across the country.

Under these conditions, Labor is planning to integrate the unions more tightly into the state apparatus, to reward and facilitate their suppression of workers’ opposition. Throughout the Labor conference, union officials and government ministers spoke in unison. The message delivered by union bureaucrats and ministers alike was the need for greater union-corporate-government collaboration in every sphere.

Labor and the Australian ruling class as a whole depend more than ever on the union apparatuses to prevent any eruption of the class struggle, sparked by the mounting anger of workers over wages, conditions, job security, soaring living costs, the housing crisis and the growing threat of nuclear war.



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