

Australian unions maintain complicity with genocide amid phoney week of action

Martin Scott

3 December 2023

An Australian group, Unionists for Palestine, dominated by fake-left organisations, declared the period from November 25 to December 3 a “National Workplace Week of Action for Palestine.”

This phoney “week of action” consisted almost entirely of token gestures—putting up petitions or posters on workplace noticeboards, wearing a scarf or badge to work, or flying a Palestinian flag out the office window.

These were intended as a cover for the complete refusal of the official trade union leaderships to take any action whatsoever in opposition to the Israeli onslaught on Palestinians. Instead, the union bureaucracy is defending the federal Labor government as it asserts Israel’s “right to defend itself” through the genocide of Palestinian civilians.

The supposed highlight of the campaign in Sydney was a protest on Friday afternoon outside New South Wales (NSW) Parliament. This event underscored the sham of the whole week of action. Its entire purpose was to put on a show that the unions were doing something to defend Gaza, when they are not.

The event was notable for the almost total lack of a trade union presence. The only ranking official to speak was Angus McFarland, NSW secretary of the Australian Services Union (ASU). He said almost nothing about the assault on Palestine save for a general call for “peace,” not dissimilar to those made by the official politicians as they support the bombardment. McFarland centred his remarks on the anti-democratic character of NSW’s anti-protest laws, noting that he had written to the Labor government seeking their repeal. The ASU, like almost all the unions, is affiliated to the very Labor Party that has deployed those laws.

The Construction and General Division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining And Energy Union (CFMEU), one of the largest industrial unions in the country, was hailed for issuing a statement in support of Palestine.

This document, issued on November 22, more than six weeks after Israel’s bombardment began, makes no distinction between oppressor and oppressed, referring to “the unspeakable slaughter of innocent people in Israel and Palestine and the retaliations from both sides.”

The possibility of industrial action by Australian workers

against the genocide is entirely absent from the statement, which merely declares “support [for] the peaceful demonstrations around Australia.”

It also does not contain a single word of criticism of the Labor government for backing the genocide.

The timing of Friday’s event, after normal business hours and on a day when Parliament did not sit, only underscored the fraud of the whole undertaking: appeals to a state Labor government that not only backs Israel, but has actively sought to criminalise protests opposing the regime.

The week of action and Friday protest were a continuation of Unionists for Palestine’s activities of over a month. It has provided a complete amnesty for the union bureaucracy, covering over and apologising for the rotten line of the leaderships.

While Australian workers and young people are regularly turning out in their tens of thousands to protest Israel’s genocide, and while hundreds have risked arrest and police brutality attempting to block Israeli ships, the union bureaucracies have either stayed silent or issued tepid “both sides” statements. The effect of this is to line up completely behind the Labor government and the Zionist regime.

At least 17,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israel’s bombardment since October 19, when the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country’s main union peak body, issued its lone public statement on the issue. Since then, the ACTU has not uttered a single word on its website or social media accounts.

Since October 7, ACTU Secretary Sally McManus has made just 13 Twitter/X posts about Israel’s assault on Palestine. All but two are wordless reposts, mostly of innocuous sources, such as Médecins Sans Frontières or the United Nations. McManus has not made a single comment on the issue since November 15.

Thus, the ACTU leader’s contribution to the online discussion on the unfolding genocide amounts to just 40 words:

•“The continuing horror of this war, Doctors Without Borders says ‘all the patients who are remaining in these hospitals will just die, and these hospitals will turn into graveyards’. #ceasefirenow” [November 12]

•“The killing of civilians & collective punishment must stop.”

[October 19]

Even in these few words, the position of McManus and the ACTU is exposed. Her November 12 description of Israel's assault on Gaza as a "war" is a gross misrepresentation of the ethnic cleansing that is being carried out by the Zionist regime. The omission of proper nouns from the October 19 post is aimed at falsely equating the actions of Israel, the oppressor, with those of oppressed Palestinians.

Even more revealing is McManus's November 12 repost of a tweet by Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who declared "Hamas has no respect for international law, but we do. ... We need steps towards a ceasefire, but it cannot be one-sided." This is an unequivocal endorsement by Australia's highest-ranking union official of the Labor government's support for genocide.

This is not an accident. The union bureaucracy is integral to the Labor Party and is involved in policy and decision making at the highest levels. As Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) delegate and Solidarity member Erima Dall recently noted, "our unions are affiliated with the Labor Party. They have delegates at Labor conference."

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), while posturing more vocally than other unions as a supporter of the Palestinian cause, remains steadfast in its refusal to call strikes to shut Israeli shipping lines out of Australia's ports.

At the Unionists for Palestine event on Friday, MUA delegate Nat Wasley gave a revealing account of this: "Every shift I have worked for the last seven-and-a-half weeks, I have been confronted by containers and vessels from the Zim shipping line. I've worked these shifts, knowing the profits from my labour are propping up a company that is actively participating in the war on the Palestinian people."

In other words, for almost two months, MUA members have been forced to load and unload the very ships that hundreds of protesters have attempted to block, in a campaign that has seen 23 people arrested and charged, and which the union claims to support.

Wasley attempted to defend the union's refusal to call strikes! After reeling off a list of previous anti-war and anti-apartheid campaigns by the Australian working class, she lamented that such action was simply not possible any more.

The organisation's hands are tied, Wasley insisted, by Australia's draconian anti-strike legislation, that makes industrial action illegal outside of an enterprise bargaining dispute, or immediate health and safety issue.

While acknowledging that this legislation was introduced by the Rudd Labor government, Wasley covered over the role of the union bureaucracy, which was centrally involved in the drafting of the laws, and which has been instrumental in enforcing them over the past 15 years. The MUA, moreover, remains affiliated to Labor, whose explicit position is the maintenance of the legislation.

Wasley's whole argument is predicated on the conception that strike action by workers has never brought them into

conflict with the law or the official political establishment. The unions, she is effectively admitting, will only take action if it is sanctioned ahead of time by the pro-genocide Labor governments and the big business industrial relations framework.

The most famous Australian example to the contrary was the three-day general strike that erupted in 1969 after Victorian union leader Clarrie O'Shea was jailed over his refusal to pay a fine imposed upon the union. This action forced the release of O'Shea, and provided a clear demonstration that repressive industrial relations laws are only enforceable to the extent that opposition by the working class is suppressed.

It is the union bureaucracy, just as much as Labor, the Fair Work Commission and the anti-strike laws, that is standing in the way of workers, on the waterfront and more broadly, taking concrete action against Israel's genocide. In attempting to cover this up, Unionists for Palestine, and the whole pseudo-left stand exposed as allies of Labor, Israel, and the war drive of global imperialism.

In order to heed the urgent call of the Palestinian trade unions for action against the genocide, workers in Australia will have to take up a struggle against the draconian Fair Work Act. This is impossible within the framework of the unions, which rely on the anti-strike laws to cover their support for big business, Labor, and imperialist war.

New organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and politically independent of the unions and Labor, must be built in every workplace. Through such committees, workers can prepare the political and industrial actions, including strikes across the waterfront, necessary to throttle the supply of weapons to the Zionist war machine.

This is a political struggle against the Labor governments, their defenders in the union bureaucracy and the capitalist system that is responsible for the genocide and the assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class everywhere.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact