

Australia: Unions at May Day rally cover up Labor's complicity in Gaza genocide

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In the first week of this month, unions held rallies in Australia's capital cities to coincide with May Day. They were dismal affairs revealing the further degeneration of the official events that supposedly mark the international day of workers' solidarity.

That was epitomised by the rally held in Sydney on May 1, which involved around 5,000 workers, mostly in the construction industry. Although it is not a public holiday, members of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) down tools for half a day each year.

It was held under conditions of widespread opposition and protests to Israel's genocidal war on the Palestinian population of Gaza, backed by the federal government, and to Labor's broader program of austerity and war. The last thing the unions wanted was a mass rally where these sentiments could be expressed.

Paul Keating, Sydney branch secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), had the task of posturing as a critic of Israel while covering up the complicity of the Labor Party and the unions in supporting the Zionist regime's war.

"We have an Israeli state that's an apartheid state, that's waging this brutality, dehumanising our Palestinian people," he declared. However, the MUA, which covers most waterfront and seafaring workers in the country, has ensured that Australian exports of weapons components and other goods to Israel have proceeded virtually without interruption over the past seven months.

Keating excused the MUA's refusal to mobilise workers against the genocide by referring to Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, which render most industrial action, particularly political strikes, illegal except as part of an enterprise bargaining dispute. Again, with his characteristic empty bluster, he

declared workers needed to "come together to fight these rotten industrial laws."

Keating noted that a Labor government had introduced this legislation. But it is the unions that have played the key role in supporting the laws and used them mercilessly as an excuse to suppress industrial action by workers. On this, Keating was silent.

Keating implied that workers themselves were to blame for the lack of action, saying, "Just think comrades, if we were prepared to organise across our communities and across the country and shut the system down. A general strike, with all the demands that we want."

Neither Keating nor any other union bureaucrat has the slightest intention of fighting for a general strike, as their long record of sabotaging and betraying strikes demonstrates. In reality, if workers demanded such action, they would all work might and main to prevent it.

In response to the barbaric war crimes being carried out in Gaza by the Zionist regime, the MUA has not shut the ports down for a single day, let alone called for broader industrial action.

The union's hostility to blocking exports to Israel was demonstrated at a "community picket" at Melbourne's Webb Dock in January. Over several days, protesters resisted repeated attempts by pepper-spray-wielding police to break up the demonstration.

Initially, union officials allowed workers to refuse to cross the picket, on "health and safety" grounds. But when management arranged a bus to transport workers across the picket with a police escort, the MUA urged organisers to shut down the protest, even though workers were refusing to board the bus.

At the May Day rally in Sydney, Keating concluded his remarks with an appeal to Labor Prime Minister

Anthony Albanese, declaring, “We demand a permanent ceasefire and our government can demand that too.”

What a fraud! The Labor government has backed the Israeli genocide to the hilt and is now in the forefront of falsely branding all opposition as “antisemitism” to provide the pretext to close down all protests in support of the Palestinians.

The unions, including the MUA, are intimately connected to the Labor Party and support its program. Indeed, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was given a warm welcome at the MUA’s recent national conference to discuss the Maritime Strategic Fleet, part of military preparations for broader US-led wars against Russia and China. That underscored the role of the union apparatus as an industrial police force for government and big business.

The phoney posturing of Keating and the MUA as supporters of the Palestinians is only possible because the various pseudo-left organisations and the Palestinian “activist” groups to which they are closely tied have consistently covered up the treacherous role of the unions and shielded them from political opposition.

Keating introduced Jana Fayyad, a leading figure in the Palestine Justice Movement, who urged the unions to do more. She cited a call by the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions for unions “to intensify actions, to strike, to do a general strike against the complicity of the governments in genocide.”

Fayyad said nothing about the fact that the bureaucrat who had just handed her the microphone, along with every other union official in the country, has ignored repeated calls for strike action by the Palestinian unions.

Fayyad then issued a “shout out to the ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions],” whose recent statement, she claimed, was “a call to action for all unions across Australia.” In fact, the ACTU statement was nothing more than another futile appeal to the federal Labor government, whose leading figures, Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Fayyad had moments earlier denounced as war criminals.

The fact that union bureaucrats at the May Day rallies felt the need to address the Gaza genocide is a reflection of the substantial opposition among workers to Israel’s war crimes and the broader escalation of

militarism around the world.

Socialist Equality Party members at the Sydney rally found widespread support for the people of Gaza, and for strike action to stop shipments of weapons and other goods to Israel. Many workers had not heard of the call from Palestinian trade unions for such action, first made in October—not surprising, as unions here have not publicised the call and have blocked any industrial action.

As for the appeals from the platform to the Labor government, a number of workers said they no longer saw any difference between Labor and the Liberal Party. Others expressed skepticism in the unions.

In stark contrast to the union rallies, the *World Socialist Web Site* International May Day 2024 Online Rally advanced a historically and theoretically grounded strategy and program for the building of a global movement of workers and young people against war, genocide and all other attacks on the working class. It can be viewed here.



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