

Australia: NSW Labor conference held behind wall of security to block protesters

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The annual conference of the state branch of the Labor Party in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, was held at the Sydney Town Hall over the weekend amid what was described as an unprecedented security operation for such an event.

In the days leading up to the conference, anonymous Labor figures spoke to the media about their "deep concern" that protesters and members of the public would intrude on the gathering to express their anger toward Labor, particularly over its complicity in the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

Previously advertised "fringe events," such as panel discussions, were cancelled at late notice because non-Labor members could buy tickets and attend them. Labor delegates and observers to the conference were instructed not to bring bags "larger than an A4 piece of paper" and had to show "unique security credentials" to gain attendance.

Some media outlets, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has covered state and federal Labor conferences for decades, were arbitrarily barred.

The measures were justified on the basis of hazy references to "safety." Labor, however, together with the media, has downplayed several disturbing acts of far-right violence. That included a failed plan last month by a fascistic youth to allegedly behead Labor's state MP for Newcastle, Tim Crackanthorp.

Instead, the security crackdown was clearly directed at opposition from the left. That was made clear on the first morning of the conference when a pro-Palestinian protest involving around 2,000 people was met by dozens of police officers, many from the riot squad.

More generally, the secrecy and security, verging on paranoia, pointed to the gulf between Labor and the vast mass of the population. The party is a bureaucratic apparatus that views ordinary people with fear and suspicion, because it is committed to a program of militarism and austerity that is inherently unpopular.

The banal tone of the conference was set by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's opening keynote address.

With an election due by next May, polling indicates that Labor's primary vote is even lower than in 2022 when it scraped into office with less than a third of ballots.

Despite the looming election, Albanese's remarks were notable for their brevity and lack of substance. The prime minister gave the impression of a political figure who increasingly has nothing to say and no pitch to make to an audience broader than the national security establishment or the business elite.

Amid the worst cost-of-living crisis for working-class households in decades, Albanese simply repeated the meagre policies his government unveiled in the May budget or earlier. They include a one-off \$300 rebate for power bills, which have soared to record highs over the past several years. Albanese also touted his government's slight changes to the previous Liberal-National government's "stage three" income tax cuts, which still overwhelmingly benefit the wealthiest layers of society.

With skyrocketing rents and mortgage repayment increases at the centre of the housing crisis, Albanese again repeated his government's plan to build 30,000 "affordable" and social housing dwellings over the next five years—a pitiable average of 6,000 a year. When the national social housing shortfall is already estimated at more than half a million dwellings, including over 100,000 in NSW alone, it is a drop in the ocean.

On the social front, that was about it. Albanese employed some vague slogans about "improving the lives of working people," which is unlikely to convince anyone.

He avoided any direct mention of the Gaza genocide despite it being a central driver of Labor's crisis. Instead, Albanese vaguely referenced "these times of global uncertainty and rising tensions" but declared: "Disagreements do not divide us, and our differences do not divide us."

The comments were in line with Labor's attempts to present hostility to its political, diplomatic and military support for the mass murder of Palestinians as an unacceptable attack on "social cohesion" that threatens

“national division.” That authoritarian line could be used against any form of social and political opposition.

The speech on the second day by NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns was similarly bereft. A lifelong apparatchik of Labor’s NSW Right faction, Minns implausibly presented his government as a friend of transport workers, based on commissioning a small new fleet of ferries and extending industrial relations provisions to some truck drivers previously not covered by them.

The Minns government is currently attempting to inflict yet another sub-inflationary pay deal on the state’s rail workers, who are by far the largest segment of the public transport workforce. This is part of a broader wage-cutting agenda targeting public servants, nurses and hospital workers.

The keynote policy Minns unveiled was that his government would introduce laws banning no-fault evictions in September. Although the legislation has yet to be publicly revealed, there are already a host of exemptions, including for landlords wishing to sell their investment properties or put them to “other use.”

Minns is proceeding with the demolition of the state’s dwindling public housing stock, including in the inner-city suburb of Waterloo. The decades-long public housing is to be replaced by a “mix” of social housing administered by non-government organisations and private apartments that would command top prices. The other plank of Minns’ housing policy is to eliminate minimal existing restrictions on property development, based on a bogus “trickle-down” theory that this would somehow reduce house prices and rents.

The conference deliberations were striking for their threadbare and prearranged character. Amid mass hostility to Labor over the social crisis and militarism, popular sentiments found no expression.

As Albanese was speaking, a sole delegate held a Palestinian flag aloft. That impotent gesture only served to highlight the lack of any broader opposition.

The conference passed a motion calling on the federal government to “recognise” Palestine. That is already in Labor’s national policy.

The whole question of recognition, moreover, has been used to bury the fact that what is currently unfolding is a genocide in Gaza and all of historic Palestine. The NSW conference was essentially calling on Labor to extend “recognition” to a pile of rubble in a move that would not disrupt Australia’s support for the mass murder in the slightest.

There was no opposition voiced to AUKUS, the militarist pact with Britain and the US, or the broader drive to war against China, of which it is a part. Nor was there any

condemnation of Labor’s imposition of the economic crisis on the backs of working people.

The trade unions signalled their full commitment to this agenda, with their delegates giving a rousing reception to both Albanese and Minns.

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) representatives walked out of Albanese’s speech to protest his government’s suspension of the Construction Forestry Maritime and Energy Union (CFMEU). The CFMEU has been targeted on the basis of unsubstantiated corruption allegations as part of a drive to enforce speedups and wage cuts in the building sector.

The ETU delegates trudged out and then trudged back in. It was a token show of opposition, motivated by fears that the witch hunt of the CFMEU will impinge on the prerogatives of the privileged union bureaucracy.

Some delegates warned that the party apparatus was out of touch with the membership and that it was increasingly difficult to sign up new members. They could only propose, however, tinkering with Labor’s administrative procedures, leading to an interminable debate on whether the state president should be directly elected by the entire membership or not, a proposal that was rejected.

A motion calling for Labor to oppose the draconian anti-protest laws it helped pass in 2019 and has used over the past year was also defeated. The legislation, condemned by human rights and civil liberties groups, provides penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment for “unauthorised” and “disruptive” demonstrations.

The conference, despite its bland character, again underscored the bankruptcy of all those, such as the pseudo-left groups like Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, who claim that Labor can be “pressured” to alter its position on Gaza or any other issue. What was on display is a bureaucratic machine that exists to serve the interests of the corporate elite and the imperialist war drive.



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