

Australian election: The Labor government's record of war and austerity

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The official Australian election campaign is marked by banalities, lies and phoney promises from Labor, the Coalition and all the parliamentary parties. Labor and the Coalition are desperately seeking to offset a major electoral crisis, while suppressing any discussion of what is to come after the election, amid stepped-up demands in the ruling elite for a massive expansion of military spending and for austerity.

Labor is claiming that it will address the enormous cost-of-living and social crisis. However, the policies it has outlined amount to a pittance, including the recently announced tax cut that would equate to less than a cup of coffee a week, beginning next year. Labor has rejected calls for any increase to sub-poverty welfare payments, nor has it outlined any policies to address the housing crisis.

Labor has made several announcements on public health and education. But they too represent a drop in the bucket of need. Labor claims that it will “fully fund” public schools in several years’ time, but that funding measure is woefully inadequate, having been based on the Gonski “reforms” that were aimed at restricting public school expenditure.

On healthcare, Labor has promoted Medicare, even as bulk-billing is at its lowest rates in many years. The hospitals are in such a state, with massive wait times, bed shortages and overworked staff, that nothing short of an unprecedented expenditure would resolve their crisis.

The real agenda of the incoming government will be determined by the demands of the ruling elite for major “budget repair,” i.e., cuts to social spending. At the same time, Labor and the Coalition are competing over who can align most closely with the Trump administration, whose fascistic agenda is accelerating capitalism’s descent into trade war and militarism.

In assessing the various promises being made by the major parties, and determining the way forward, it is critical that workers take stock of the experiences of the outgoing Labor government. The record shows that it was a government of militarism and war, of austerity and sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

War preparations

The very first act of Albanese’s government, on May 23, 2022, before Labor’s thin parliamentary majority had even been confirmed, was to send him and Foreign Minister Penny Wong to a meeting of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) in Tokyo. They were hastily sworn in to an interim government just three hours before they departed.

In Japan, Albanese and Wong stood alongside President Joe Biden, as he outlined a further escalation of the US-led confrontation against China, which has been designated by Washington as the chief threat to American imperialist hegemony. The Quad brings together four of the

Indo-Pacific region’s biggest military powers, the US, Australia, Japan and India, in a de facto alliance explicitly directed against Beijing.

Next, Wong embarked on an almost continuous 12-month tour of the region. She visited every country in the Pacific and southeast Asia, hectoring and threatening their leaders that no deviation from the US confrontation with China would be tolerated.

The Labor government launched the largest military build-up since World War II by implementing AUKUS, the anti-China pact between Australia, Britain and the US, which had been unveiled under the Morrison government. Albanese flew to San Diego for the March 2023 announcement of the \$368 billion deal with Britain and the US for Australia’s purchase of a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

Labor then commissioned a Defence Strategic Review, released in April 2023. It repudiated previous military doctrines, nominally based on the defence of the Australian continent. Instead, the military would need “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific, combined with a “whole-of-society” effort. That is a doctrine historically associated with military dictatorships which insist that every civil institution must be subordinated to the war drive.

Over the past three years, Labor has completed Australia’s transformation into a key state for a US-led war against China. US basing arrangements have been expanded, including through the stationing of nuclear strike capabilities in the north and west of the continent.

Since October 2023, the Labor government has fully supported Israel’s slaughter of the Palestinians, politically, diplomatically and materially, including through ongoing weapons export permits. Labor’s support for the genocide in Gaza is part of its backing for US-led imperialist wars globally. Labor also took Australia’s contribution to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine war to more than \$1.5 billion, aiding Kiev’s fascistic regime.

Social assault

Domestically, Labor dismantled even the semblance of a coordinated public health response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Labor ended any requirement for infected individuals to isolate and abolished a federal COVID leave payment. This was an edict for sick workers to remain on the job for the sake of corporate profit. Labor also abolished PCR testing and terminated daily reporting of COVID statistics, making it impossible to track the pandemic and keeping the population in the dark.

In Labor’s first year in office alone, there were 12,480 official COVID deaths—many more than the 8,077 in the previous two years. But even that understated the true toll. There were as many as 25,000 “excess” deaths, greater than in a normal year, leading to the first

sustained reduction in life expectancy since World War II.

Labor also quickly took the knife to social spending. Its first October 2022 budget cut federal spending on the crisis ridden-public healthcare system by up to \$2.4 billion over four years. Its second May 2023 budget outlined \$74 billion in cuts over the decade, especially targeting the National Disability Insurance Scheme, as well as public education and university funding.

Labor's cuts deepened in the 2024 and 2025 budgets. Its cosmetic "cost-of-living" promises that have done nothing to halt the financial stress confronting millions of working-class households. Labor has intensified the biggest reversal in working-class living standards in the post-World War II period. Workers' average purchasing power has declined by 9 percent since 2019, 13 interest rate hikes have driven up mortgage payments and rents, while food prices, power bills and other costs have soared.

Labor's measures are centrally targeted at suppressing working-class opposition, working in partnership with the trade union apparatus. In December 2022, Labor passed industrial relations legislation, hailed by the unions as a "victory." The bill provided expanded powers for the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) to impose wage and condition-cutting agreements, including by enabling the FWC to declare a dispute "intractable" and enforce sellout deals without even a pretence of "fairness" or industrial democracy.

In August 2024, the repressive axis of Labor's agenda was reinforced by its takeover of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union. Based on unsubstantiated media allegations, 80,000 construction workers have been stripped of their industrial rights and placed under the control of an administrator, acting as a quasi-dictator in league with the major construction corporations.

Throughout the first half of the Albanese government, it tried to adopt a phoney progressive face by proposing a constitutional referendum to entrench an indigenous advisory assembly, called the Voice, in the corridors of power.

Far from resolving the poor conditions of most Aboriginal people, the Voice's purpose was to further elevate an elite layer into the structures of the very capitalist state that presided over the massacres and dispossession of indigenous people. The proposal sought to divide working people along racial lines, push a "national unity," which serves the war agenda, and make Aboriginal areas in the country's north more readily available for military bases.

The Socialist Equality Party campaigned for an active boycott of the Voice referendum against the Labor lies that it would alleviate the social crisis facing the vast majority of Aboriginal people and the racist dog whistling of Dutton and the Coalition.

The defeat of the referendum was a major blow to the Labor government. Workers simply did not believe its claims to be concerned about the plight of indigenous people when the living conditions of all workers were being devastated, and the government was backing the Gaza genocide, which began a week before the vote.

Attack on democratic rights

The Albanese government and its state Labor counterparts have spearheaded an assault on political dissent, free speech and basic democratic rights. Slandering opposition to the Israeli regime's massacres as antisemitic, academics, artists, students, health workers and many others have been vilified and threatened.

Labor governments have rushed far-reaching "hate speech" and anti-protest laws through the parliaments. Albanese's government not only intervened directly to freeze the research grant of anti-genocide

academic Dr. Randa Abdel-Fattah, threatening her with dismissal. It urged university researchers to comply with the Trump White House's threats to axe US funding for any projects that could be linked to China, socialism or "anti-American beliefs."

Labor's offensive, like Trump's, goes far beyond the Gaza genocide. It is seeking to create a repressive wartime atmosphere and strengthen the state apparatus in preparation for conflict with China. Every part of society, from the schools and universities to the workplaces, is being integrated into the military build-up.

As in the US, Europe and globally, immigrants and refugees, one of the most vulnerable sections of the international working class, are under mounting assault. Last year, Labor reopened the notorious "Pacific Solution" Nauru detention camp, joined hands with the Coalition to pass a mass deportation bill that could see 80,000 visa holders removed from the country, and imposed reactionary cuts to international students, making them scapegoats for the housing crisis.

As the failure of the mass anti-genocide demonstrations has shown, none of this will be halted through protests and appeals to the Labor leadership or any other party of the capitalist political establishment.

In this election, as previously, the Greens and the pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative, their electoral front, Victorian Socialists and Socialist Alliance, are once again peddling the "lesser evil" fraud—vote Labor or at least preference it against the Coalition, to keep Dutton out and then pressure the next Albanese government to change course.

Despite its past claims to represent workers, Labor has always defended the interests of big business. It has functioned throughout its history as the main buttress of Australian capitalism, particularly in times of war and economic crisis.

The entire record of the Albanese government demonstrates that it will not be pressured. In response to the millions who protested against Israel's horrific massacres, Labor has backed the Zionist war criminals to the hilt and persecuted those who have opposed the genocide.

The only answer to war, social crisis and attacks on basic democratic rights is a turn to the socialist and internationalist program that Labor was founded to oppose. A new revolutionary leadership must be built in the working class.

We appeal to all workers, students and young people to actively support our election campaign and, above all, join the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party.

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