

Australian unions promote Labor ahead of federal election

Warwick Dove, SEP candidate for the Senate in NSW
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In the lead-up to the May 3 federal election, Australia's unions have launched their campaigns for the re-election of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the Labor government, which is increasingly recognised by the working class as responsible for the deepening cost-of-living crisis.

The unions promoting Labor is not new or unusual—the two are totally intertwined, financially, politically and organisationally. Senior union officials dominate the Labor Party's national executive and other policy-making committees. Many of the party's candidates and elected representatives entered into parliamentary politics after climbing the ranks of the union bureaucracies.

What is starker in 2025 than ever before, however, is the growing gulf between the interests of the workers the unions claim to represent and those served by the Labor Party and its governments.

Numerous polls show support for Labor has fallen further since 2022, when the party recorded its lowest primary vote in almost 90 years, less than one-third of the total. The sharpest falls were in poorer working-class electorates.

Due to the growing unpopularity of the Labor government, and the short list of its policies that could be defined as a win by even the most cynical spin doctor, the unions have centred on a negative campaign against Liberal-National leader Peter Dutton.

The Australian Council for Trade Unions (ACTU) has produced leaflets depicting Dutton as a puppet controlled by mining magnate Gina Rinehart, Australia's richest person. The unions are warning workers "Don't risk Dutton," to disguise and divert from the pro-big business agenda of Labor, which is fully supported by the union bureaucracy.

Even as it praises the Albanese government for "getting wages moving," the ACTU is compelled to admit that real wages across Australia have declined by up to 5 percent since 2020. This is just one component of the biggest assault on working-class living standards since records began in the 1950s, which has been presided over by the Albanese government.

The assault on wages has been spearheaded, above all, by state Labor governments, which have enforced harsh wage caps, far below the rate of inflation, throughout the public

sector. This would not have been possible without the assistance of the unions, which have shut down workers' struggles and imposed the demands of the state governments.

In New South Wales (NSW) in 2022, after multiple mass strikes by nurses, teachers and other public sector workers, the unions insisted that the way forward for workers was to elect a Labor government in the 2023 state election. This was always a fraud—Labor leader Chris Minns was openly hostile to the striking workers when in opposition and made clear that, if elected, his government would not deliver pay rises above inflation.

This has been borne out, with the Minns Labor government waging an industrial offensive that, if anything, has been harsher than the previous Liberal-National government under Perrottet. Labor is not only attacking wages and working conditions through its miserly public sector offer of 9.5 percent over three years, but eviscerating basic workplace democratic rights as well.

At the behest of the NSW Labor government, the state industrial relations commission (IRC) has ordered an effective nine-month strike ban on public sector nurses. This has allowed the government to impose its wage "offer" despite the widespread opposition among nurses and midwives.

Despite this, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) is shilling for the Albanese government! In a March 28 press release, the ANMF fraudulently claimed Labor had "delivered a long list of policies that will benefit Australia's nurses and midwives and their families."

The NSW government's most venomous attacks have been reserved for rail workers, who have been subjected to a vitriolic government-media propaganda campaign. Minns has repeatedly accused them of "holding the city to ransom." His government tried twice to have strikes by rail workers banned by the Federal Court before the Fair Work Commission (FWC) ordered a six-month suspension of industrial action.

Labor's hostility to workers' democratic rights does not stop at the NSW border. This was highlighted by the threatened intervention by federal Minister for Workplace Relations Murray Watt, or Albanese himself, to shut down the rail dispute if the FWC did not deliver the ruling they wanted.

In November-December, the Albanese government played a

key role in ensuring that a strike by more than 1,500 Woolworths warehouse employees, among the largest and most significant industrial struggles in recent years, was shut down with workers receiving none of their demands.

In an unprecedented and draconian ruling, the FWC declared the picket “unlawful” and a breach of “good faith bargaining,” and banned union officials from blocking access at one facility or encouraging workers from doing so. The UWW bureaucracy used this as a pretext to shut down the strike and ram through sell-out deals, which did not abolish the punitive performance monitoring “Framework” and imposed nominal wage increases barely higher than the company’s original offer.

This experience makes the UWW’s promotion of Labor in the election all the more revealing.

The sharpest expression of Labor’s disdain for the working class came in August. A scurrilous media campaign of untested and unproven allegations of corruption and organised crime links was seized upon as a pretext to place the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under administration.

Hundreds of elected union delegates and officials were immediately sacked and the 80,000 building workers covered by the CFMEU were put under the thumb of a quasi-dictator who answers only to the capitalist state.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained, this had nothing to do with “cleaning out rogue elements” from the union. Instead, it was aimed at further suppressing the struggles of a historically militant section of the working class in order to facilitate an attack on the wages and conditions of building workers amid a slump in the construction industry and the broader economy.

The ACTU, in line with most other unions, gave its full-throated support to this blatant attack on workers’ rights, accepting the media allegations at face value and declaring that such “criminality” was not compatible with the “trade union movement.”

Perhaps the filthiest role was that played by the ousted CFMEU officials and their cronies in the other building industry unions, including the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union.

These bureaucrats ensured workers took no industrial action at all in the six weeks before the imposition of administration. Even after Labor’s attack was carried out, just a handful of rallies were called before opposition to the anti-democratic measure was diverted behind a dead-end high court case.

The anger of building workers compelled the union bureaucrats to declare they would cut off financial and political support to the Labor Party. There was even talk of these unions forming a new political party, or endorsing independent candidates in the election, but this has been quietly dropped.

The Trade Unions for Democracy Summit late last month took up the same bankrupt perspective as the ACTU: “Put Peter

Dutton last.” In other words, whatever else you do with your vote, preference Labor above the Coalition.

The unwavering support of the trade unions for the Labor Party, under conditions where it is carrying out sweeping attacks on the working class, underscores that neither represent the interest of workers.

That is why the SEP is campaigning for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves and independent of the union bureaucracy. We call for these committees to join with the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, a means to unite the struggles of workers worldwide, who all confront similar attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

The SEP is the only party standing in the federal election advancing a socialist program of action for the working class. The SEP’s demands include:

- Workers must receive immediate pay increases of at least 30 percent, to make up for the real wage cuts of recent years!
- Affordable housing for all! For a massive expansion of public housing and rent caps to ensure everyone has a decent place to live.
- Trillions for public education, healthcare and welfare! End the crisis in the public schools and hospitals! High-quality education and healthcare are a social right!
- Place the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control! Expropriate the fortunes of the billionaires! The working class must control the social wealth it produces!

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