

Australian unions pledge support for re-elected Labor government

Martin Scott
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The Australian Labor government's re-election in the May 3 federal election has been met with a chorus of celebration from the country's unions. Along with messages of congratulations, leading union officials have openly pledged their ongoing support for Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his administration.

This should serve as a stark warning for workers. The Albanese government has already presided over the worst reversal in working-class living standards in decades, slashed spending on health and education and carried out sweeping attacks on workers' democratic rights. The union apparatus, complicit in all of this, is endorsing another 3 years of this administration and signalling its total commitment to enforcing the even harsher assault that is to come.

Defying more than a year of opinion polls and predictions of a knife-edge result with no party able to form a majority government, the outcome on Saturday was a historic loss for the Liberal-Nationals and their leader Peter Dutton, who was ousted from his own seat.

The most significant figure in the election, however, was not Albanese or Dutton, but Donald Trump. The vote against the Trump-aligned Coalition was a clear repudiation of the program of trade war, militarism and dictatorial rule identified with the US president.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus said on Sunday, "Australians have rejected the path of Donald Trump's far right populism." This was the only acknowledgement—by McManus or any other union official—that the election was in any way related to events elsewhere in the world, save for her reference to workers having "lived through some tough years due to global inflation."

Both comments are aimed not at connecting workers with the escalating crisis of global capitalism and threat of world war, but at downplaying the significance of world events and promoting illusions that Australia is somehow exempt from their impact. At the same time, McManus was seeking to absolve Labor of responsibility for the existing cost-of-living

crisis—"due to global inflation"—while simultaneously claiming the reinstalled government would create "good well-paid jobs" and build a "better future."

The reality is that the Albanese and Labor are compelled by the same global processes that have elevated Trump to the White House and installed fascistic leaders elsewhere. The crisis of world capitalism is far advanced, and the ruling class has no answer but imperialist war, necessarily accompanied by harsh cuts to social spending, wages and democratic rights to suppress working-class opposition to this barbaric program.

In Australia, the implosion of the Liberal-Nationals means the ruling elite is now entirely dependent on Labor and the trade unions to impose its agenda of war and austerity. Both forces have quickly made clear they are ready and willing to take up this duty.

Albanese's first order of business on returning to office was to speak with Trump about the anti-China AUKUS pact, affirming Labor's plans to further preparations for Australia to play a frontline role in a US-led war in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Foreign Minister Penny Wong was quick to blame the electoral failure of the Greens on their bogus pro-Palestine posturing, signalling Labor intends to double-down on its backing of the US-Israeli genocide.

On Tuesday, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) bureaucracy publicly congratulated the prime minister, declaring, "We look forward to working with the government to build a strong, resilient and long-term strategic fleet." As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, this is a longstanding union-Labor plan that will channel vast sums of public funds into the hands of major shipping companies, while creating the conditions for civilian seafarers to be dragooned into military operations.

This is in stark contrast to the hollow words of union officials at the MUA-led May Day rally in Sydney last week, denouncing "imperialists" and speaking of the "need to oppose any war effort by the Australian government."

More broadly, the promotion by the ACTU, Australian Workers Union (AWU) and others of Labor's "Future Made

in Australia,” is similarly a commitment to aid the establishment of a war economy. This initiative, dressed up in lies about “good well-paid jobs,” is in fact a nationalist program aimed at subsidising investment in strategic, war-related industries.

On the domestic front, Treasurer Jim Chalmers called time on pitiful cost-of-living handouts, stating that Labor’s second term would be focussed on “productivity,” in other words, deepening the exploitation of workers.

This will require the close collaboration of the union apparatus. An unnamed union official told the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday, “I think the most important thing in IR [industrial relations] will be productivity—trying to make sure more is done with the same use of labour.”

The unions cheering on a Labor Party win should not come as a shock. The two are deeply intertwined—financially, politically, and organisationally. Senior union officials hold powerful positions on the Labor Party’s national executive and key policy committees. A significant number of Labor parliamentarians began their political careers by rising through the ranks of the union apparatus.

But there is an air of desperation to the bureaucrats’ proclamations that “The election outcome is down to the work of the trade union movement,” and “WE DID IT!” This is because the union officials are well aware of the mounting hostility among workers to Labor, who received scarcely more than one-third of the primary vote on Saturday.

To the extent that the unions—which themselves can count as members just 13 percent of the workforce—played any significant role in the election, it was entirely on the basis of urging workers to “keep Dutton out,” on the grounds that Labor represented a “lesser evil.”

The unions focussed on Dutton, along with Trump and other far-right figures, such as Gina Rinehart, during the election campaign, in an effort to prevent any discussion of Labor’s actual record over the past 3 years.

Real wages across Australia have declined by around 5 percent since 2020, spearheaded 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 struggles by workers in health, education, public transport and more broadly, and enforced the demands of the state governments.

With the full support of the union bureaucrats, Labor has introduced sweeping changes to industrial relations laws, further empowering the industrial courts to intervene in disputes, shut down strikes and impose cuts to wages and conditions at the behest of big business.

The sharpest expression of Labor’s anti-working class

agenda was its placement of the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under quasi-dictatorial administration, stripping 80,000 building workers of any semblance of workplace democratic rights. While this was done under the pretext of “cleaning out rogue elements,” the real purpose was to neuter a historically militant section of the working class in order to suppress opposition to attacks on their wages and conditions.

This is the program the unions—including those covering the building industry—are endorsing when they celebrate Saturday’s election result. Workers be warned—far worse is in store, and the very organisations claiming to represent you are ready to impose the assault that is to come.

New organisations of struggle must be built. Rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent of the union bureaucracy and Labor, must be established in workplaces across the country as a matter of urgency.

But the dangers confronting workers are international in origin and scope. From real wage cuts and harsh austerity at home, to the global drive to war, none of the major issues workers face can be resolved on a national basis.

That is why the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, has established the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, a means to unite the struggles of workers worldwide, who all confront the growing threat of world war, as well as deepening attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

This will form the basis of the fight for a revolutionary socialist perspective, directed against the root cause of war and austerity, the capitalist system.



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