

Australian unions silent on Labor-backed US-Israel war on Iran

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The silence of the Australian trade union bureaucracy on the US-led criminal war against Iran, almost two weeks on, is deafening.

At least 1,255 people, including 200 children, are dead and in excess of 12,000 are wounded, as the US intensifies its attacks, vowing to obliterate a country of more than 90 million people. The Trump administration, which has already boasted it will pay no heed to international law or “stupid rules of engagement,” in the war against Iran, intends it as a strike against China, posing the imminent threat of global conflict.

The Australian ruling elite, with the federal Labor government as its spearhead, is fully committed to the drive of US imperialism to restore its hegemony. This was concretely expressed in the presence of three Australian military personnel on the US submarine that sank unarmed Iranian frigate IRIS Dena, killing at least 140 people.

Further confirmation of Labor’s complicity in this illegal war was provided Tuesday, with the federal government’s announcement that Australia would deploy weaponry and troops to the Middle East to take part in the bombardment.

Yet not a single union has opposed the Australian state’s role in the carnage, let alone called for industrial action to halt the supply of war materials. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), along with virtually every union in the country, has not even acknowledged the war, let alone opposed it.

The silence of the bureaucracy is no accident. It is a deliberate statement of support for the illegal war of aggression and an attempt to cover up Labor’s complicity, in the face of strong opposition to war among workers and youth. The unions are also covering over the domestic implications for the Australian working class of the war, including deepening austerity measures to fund the military machine, on top of even sharper rises in the cost of living, the beginnings of which are already being felt at the petrol pump.

The unions’ support for a war of annihilation that has already seen schools bombed and critical life-sustaining infrastructure targeted would be extraordinary, except that it follows on from two and a half years in which the apparatus has worked to suppress mass opposition to Israel’s imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza.

To date, just two Australian unions have issued statements critical of the war against Iran, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). The AMWU, formerly the metalworkers’ union, covers many workers in shipbuilding and other war-related industries.

The AMWU statement, published yesterday, declares early on that “we will not allow our labour to be weaponised for wars of aggression.” But the AMWU bureaucracy has no intention of workers taking action against war. Instead, the AMWU appeals to the federal government to “use every diplomatic lever to prevent war with Iran.” This is a ludicrous proposition—the Albanese administration is openly committing Australian aircraft, munitions and troops to prosecute the war.

The statement also confirms the AMWU bureaucracy’s support for building the war machine, noting, “we must maintain a strong defence industry,” but promoting the lie that a line of distinction can be drawn between “the protection of our shores” and “the pursuit of aggressive military adventures abroad.”

Australia is, and since its federation in 1901 has been, an imperialist power. Every war in which it has participated has been of an “aggressive” nature, aimed at asserting the interests of the banks and the corporations. The reference to the “protection of our shores” is simply an exercise in promoting the fraud that Australian militarism is of a defensive character, and legitimising the vast expansion of the war machine that is underway.

The MUA published a statement on March 3 ostensibly opposing the US-Israel attacks on Iran, which the union characterised as “reckless, illegal acts of aggression that drag the world closer to a wider war and nuclear catastrophe.”

While lamenting the actions of “successive governments,” tying “our foreign policy” to “US war fighting strategies,” the MUA statement does not mention Labor by name. Moving from obfuscation to outright fraud, the union “calls on the Australian Government to condemn this war,” promoting the conception that the Albanese government can be politely persuaded to reverse its position.

This is a sham and the MUA bureaucracy knows it. Australian imperialism’s backing for war against Iran is the continuation of more than three decades of unconditional support for more than three decades of unending US-led wars, throughout the Middle East and against Russia in Ukraine.

None of this has been seriously opposed by the MUA or any other union, in line with their role as defenders of the “national interest,” that is, the profits of Australian capitalism. Throughout those wars, the MUA has remained formally affiliated to Labor, meaning it is de facto a component of the government that is participating in the onslaught on Iran.

That basic reality has become clearer as the MUA has abandoned

even a pretence of opposition to the war since news broke of Australia's direct involvement in sinking the IRIS Dena. Subsequent statements by the union refer to "escalating geopolitical tensions" and "conflict in Iran," as if there is some mystery over who and what is responsible.

The appeal for Labor to "condemn the war" has been replaced by a call to arms: "The need for a strategic fleet of Australian flagged and crewed ships operating in the national interest has never been more urgent," the MUA wrote on March 11.

Promoted under the bogus pretext of providing jobs for "Australian seafarers," the MUA's longstanding demand for a Maritime Strategic Fleet would amount to a scheme of subsidies and tax breaks for major shipping companies who agree to register their vessels in Australia. These ships—and their crews—could then be commandeered for military purposes, with compensation paid to their corporate owners to ensure profits are not impacted by the defence of the "national interest."

Despite their occasional "militant" rhetoric on the Gaza genocide, the actions of the MUA bureaucracy since October 2023 add up to the same as those of the rest of the trade union apparatus: precisely zero. Not a single strike has been called and not a single shipment has been blocked.

Every single week, the MUA has enforced the orderly loading and unloading of cargo from the Israeli ZIM shipping line, which dedicated its fleet to genocide at the end of 2023. While the Labor government has openly backed the genocide, including through weapons exports, the MUA has functioned as its enforcer and as an enabler of the Zionist war machine itself.

Far from succumbing to leftward "pressure" through the endless protests, sometimes involving the MUA, that promote the line of appeals to the government, Labor has become even more brazen in its support for US-led wars and has stepped up its use of authoritarian measures at home to crush protests.

On the criminal war of aggression against Iran, just as much as the genocide in Gaza, the MUA's mantra that "peace is union business" is just an empty slogan, designed to trap workers' opposition to war and defend the political establishment.

While the MUA bureaucracy have their own grievances and minor differences with the Labor government's foreign policy, they, along with the rest of the trade union apparatus, are tied by a thousand threads to Labor and irreconcilably hostile to any fight by workers against it. More fundamentally, the class role of the union bureaucracy is to suppress the class struggle and enforce the requirements of big business and the capitalist state.

The international working class is the only social force that can stop war. Coordinated mass strikes across ports, logistics, weapons manufacturing and more broadly would bring the machinery of war to a grinding halt. But this is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus.

Workers should draw sharp political lessons from the fact that the organisations that claim to represent their interests are effectively lining up behind a massive new war of annihilation against an oppressed and historically impoverished country. Organisations that support the mass murder of workers and youth abroad are enemies of the working class everywhere, including in Australia.

In previous decades, the unions, while always bitterly hostile to a genuine, socialist and internationalist fight against imperialist war, have at least postured as opponents of war. Their silence now reflects the further shift to the right by the union bureaucracies, in line with that of the Labor Party with which they are affiliated.

That is inextricably linked to the crisis of the capitalist system and the preparation for new and even greater crimes, including Australia's ever-deepening integration under the union-backed Labor government into the US plans for a catastrophic war with China. The unions' tacit support for war with Iran is a signal that if a war with China breaks out, they will not only support it, but will serve to suppress opposition from the working class.

The fight against imperialist war is a fight against the Labor government and all its defenders, including the union bureaucracy. A new, political movement of the working class must forged, in opposition to the the state, Labor, the unions and a capitalist system plunging humanity towards barbarism.

New organs of struggle must be built—rank-and-file committees in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods, democratically controlled by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent of the trade unions. Above all, this must be an international fight, along class lines, not national borders. Workers in Australia and the US have the same fundamental class interests as workers in Iran and throughout the Middle East, in opposition to the billionaire oligarchs and their warmongering political representatives.

The Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties worldwide is fighting to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, as the mechanism through which workers can be united internationally, in a fight for a world free of poverty, oppression and war, i.e., a socialist society.



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