

Australian Labor Party conference: Right-wing apparatus suppresses any debate

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27 July 2026

The 50th national conference of the Australian Labor Party, held from Thursday to Saturday at the Adelaide Convention Centre, was possibly the most stage-managed and tightly controlled in its history.

Labor's conferences have always been choreographed affairs, with discussion on the floor determined by and subordinate to the backroom manoeuvres of factional powerbrokers, a process that has become more naked over recent decades, as the party has lost any mass membership in the working class. Even in that period, however, there have been shows of debate, meant to simulate some sort of political life.

Not at this conference. There was no debate whatsoever, as delegates unanimously endorsed the party platform and its various chapters, elected a leadership unopposed and waived through banal amendments, many of them minor word changes, that had already received the blessing of the factional chiefs. The anodyne character of the event, as a show of complete "unity" around Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, drew comparisons in the official media to exercises in democracy in such states as North Korea.

There was a close relationship between the form of the event and its political content.

Labor, in office federally and in most of the states, is carrying out a reactionary program in the interests of the corporate elite and the military-intelligence apparatus. It is an active partner in American imperialism's developing global war, participating in war crimes throughout the Middle East, including the illegal assault on Iran, backing Washington's conflict with Russia in Ukraine and placing Australia on the frontlines of plans for a catastrophic war against China.

War abroad is accompanied by a war on the social and democratic rights of the working class. Labor is carrying out sweeping austerity, including \$63.8 billion of cuts contained in the May budget, and police-state measures directed in the first instance against mass hostility to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, but extending to all social and political opposition.

The platform and the conference signalled its full support for this program, though shrouded behind a fog of banality, obfuscation and outright lies about a commitment to the needs of ordinary people. For obvious reasons, the conference delegates did not want to dwell upon or discuss openly Labor's inherently unpopular agenda.

Labor, moreover, is tasked with implementing this program

under conditions of a crisis of the two-party system. The traditional conservative outfit, the Liberal-National Coalition, is in collapse, Labor's own support, particularly in working-class areas, is at record low levels, and the far-right populist One Nation is on the rise, even outperforming the major parties according to some polls.

With the Coalition on the brink of death, and fears that One Nation is too unstable to be trusted with government, the ruling elite is heavily dependent on Labor and its affiliated trade union apparatus. The conference going off without the slightest hitch was therefore a strategic necessity for not only the Labor leadership, but for the bourgeoisie that it represents.

Then there is the character of Labor itself. The conference was not so much the gathering of a political party, as of a sclerotic bureaucratic apparatus. Fully 30 percent of the voting delegates were parliamentarians, with the remainder predominantly their apparatchiks and union bureaucrats. From the conference platform, Labor leaders paid tribute to a rank-and-file that was almost completely absent and more significantly, that increasingly does not exist.

The handful of ordinary Labor Party members attending as observers were dwarfed in number by business lobbyists, who were treated as the VIPs of the event.

The *Australian Financial Review* reported that "Chief executives and lobbyists are paying \$12,000 per ticket to attend the Federal Labor Business Exchange on the sidelines of the conference, drawn from subscribers of Labor's pay-for-access scheme known as the Federal Labor Business Forum, for which membership starts at \$33,000."

It added that some government ministers were scheduled to hold "more than 40 meetings" with lobbyists, over the course of a conference that lasted just two-and-a-half days. The hobnobbing extended to Labor's central leadership. Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke, in charge of the country's security apparatus, was virtually absent from the conference floor, but found time to play the guitar for the corporate chiefs. Albanese reportedly attended five separate functions in one evening.

There was an air of unreality to the deliberations on the conference floor. The immense global crisis was hinted at, as was mass discontent in the population, but only in vague terms. The foreign policy section of the platform emphasised Labor's ironclad commitment to the US alliance, but under conditions where the US is escalating its assault on Iran, the name of that

country did not pass the lips of Labor leaders. The fascistic US President Donald Trump, whom Albanese and the government have fawned over, also was not named.

In opening the event, Labor's South Australian state premier Peter Malinauskas noted that it was being held in "unprecedented times" but provided no elaboration. While the Coalition was "splintered" there could be no "complacency," Malinauskas declared, as he warned against the rise of One Nation. The right-wing party was grounded in "grievance" and "pessimism," whereas Labor represented "our nation's values" and was a tested "party of government."

That transparent pitch to the ruling elite was accompanied by a claim that Labor had saved jobs by keeping the steelworks afloat in the regional town of Whyalla. In reality, Labor has provided subsidies to big business and has done so in a sector that is considered critical to "sovereign capabilities" bound up with militarism and war.

Albanese's speech followed similar lines. It was necessary to be prepared "for the next challenge the world throws at us," he declared, before claiming that Labor had ensured Australian fuel supplies amid "the Middle East conflict," i.e., the war against Iran that he was among the first world leaders to support. There have been repeated warnings from experts of fuel shortages.

Albanese denounced One Nation for "raging against a system that you are a part of." There was a veiled fear, not only of the far-right party, but of the broader social discontent that it is exploiting in a reactionary manner.

Albanese too presented Labor as the only viable party of government, while claiming that it was seeking to address the social ills feeding opposition. But he could point to almost nothing. Labor was aiding the healthcare system, he claimed, amid the greatest crisis of the public hospitals in their history. Minor changes to property tax investment laws in the May budget were presented as a "generational" reform that would aid first homebuyers, even though the government's own figures acknowledge nothing will change in the super-inflated housing market.

Aside from that, most of Albanese's speech consisted of substance free slogans, reminiscent of corporate advertising, such as "You can kick the can down the road and leave the problem for someone else to solve. Or you can take responsibility, you can take action."

The disconnect continued throughout the event. Delegates pledged their support for public education, which is being gutted by Labor governments. On the very first day of the conference, tens of thousands of public school staff were striking in Victoria, against attempts to slash their pay and conditions by the state Labor government and the Australian Education Union bureaucracy.

Health Minister Mark Butler hailed the establishment of the market-based National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013 as a "great Labor reform," and other delegates rapturously thanked the federal government for its commitment to the scheme. That was Orwellian, given that the centrepiece of Labor's May budget was a \$38 billion cut to the NDIS, the largest attack on a social program in Australian history, which will remove 241,000

disabled people from any support.

The gulf between the conference and reality was so vast that even the most tepid show of opposition could not be permitted, as though it were an intrusion by the world into the hermetically sealed enclosure of the Labor bureaucracy.

Labor backbencher Ed Husic signalled that he was intending to move an amendment to the foreign policy section of the platform that would "acknowledge" the International Court of Justice finding of a "plausible case" that Israel was committing a genocide in Gaza and that Australia had obligations under international law to oppose such a crime.

Labor leaders, proclaiming their commitment to an "international rules-based order," i.e., the domination of American imperialism, mobilised to prevent Husic from putting the motion referencing international law to the conference floor. Significantly, it was the "left" Maritime Union of Australia, which has postured as an opponent of the genocide, that pulled out of seconding Husic's motion at the last minute to ensure it was not heard.

In an event without debate or interest, discussion about Husic's intervention dominated media coverage, effectively filling a vacuum. In a press conference after his motion was scuttled, Husic emphasised his commitment to Labor, stating that part of his aim was to show that Labor was a party in which debate was possible, in order to head off growing disaffection among ordinary people.

That underscored the central contradiction of the conference. Under conditions where the entire Labor and union bureaucracy has shifted far to the right, and there was no prospect of substantial opposition, the apparatus was seemingly terrified of dissent.

The reason is that Labor is under intense pressure. From above, it faces demands from the ruling elite for an even greater acceleration of militarism, austerity and attacks on social conditions. From below, it confronts vast opposition that will increasingly take the form of a movement of the working class against Labor and the union bureaucracy, as foreshadowed by the struggle of Victorian educators. Any cracks, however narrow, threaten a fissure.

The fragility of this bureaucratic apparatus found expression the day after the conference. At an event pitched as one of complete unity, factional bosses had evidently been discussing the need to remove Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan, who has failed to end the teachers dispute, as the corporate elite has demanded, and is widely despised among working people, with a state election due to be held in November. Allan is likely to be ousted tomorrow. Her fate is a signal of a broader crisis of Labor, not only at the state level but federally.



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