

Maritime Union of Australia helps quash debate of Gaza genocide at Labor conference

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As they presided over its 50th national conference in Adelaide last week, the Labor Party's factional powerbrokers were anxious to suppress even the most limited discussion of contentious issues.

The concern was not of genuine opposition, given the conference was attended almost exclusively by Labor politicians, apparatchiks and union bureaucrats—all right-wing careerists devoted to a party that functions as a pro-business bureaucratic apparatus. Rather it was that such debate would undermine Labor's pitch to the ruling class that it is a completely "united" party of "responsible government" in a period of mounting upheaval.

And, more significantly, amid growing discontent among working people the fear was that such debate, by forcing its leaders to show their hand openly, would put Labor's character as a reactionary party of militarism, austerity and war on public display.

The conference was the first held since the Israeli genocide in Gaza began in October, 2023. The staggering war crime, and the federal Labor government's complicity in it, has provoked mass opposition, expressed in some of the largest and most sustained anti-war demonstrations in Australian history.

That is one expression of broader popular hostility to militarism, indicated also in widespread consternation over the AUKUS pact with the US and the UK, under which Australia is to acquire nuclear-powered submarines at a cost of \$368 billion, to prepare for a US-led war against China.

The conference was being held, moreover, amid the escalation of the US war against Iran, an aggressive and illegal attack against a country of 90 million people that is a component of a developing global war targeting Russia and China. Labor was among the first and most enthusiastic supporters of the US assault on Iran, but the war was scarcely mentioned at all.

There was a prospect, however, that Gaza and AUKUS would be raised and they were two of the issues the Labor apparatus was most determined to prevent any discussion of on the conference floor. It is highly revealing that it was the

"left" unions that have previously postured on those issues, principally the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), that played the linchpin role in that suppression operation.

The conference's draft platform said nothing at all about the issue of the genocide. Instead, it cynically expressed support for a "two-state solution," under conditions where Israel is seeking to complete its ethnic-cleansing of all historic Palestine, and blandly noted Israel's occupation. In the context of what is actually occurring, the draft was a reaffirmation of support for Israel, replete with the usual condemnations of Hamas.

Federal Labor backbencher Ed Husic foreshadowed that he would move an amendment. Its text, since published online, acknowledges the International Court of Justice finding in 2024 of a "plausible case" that Israel was committing genocide, and its determinations that Israel's occupation constituted illegal "racial segregation," i.e., apartheid.

The motion did not reference the Labor government's political, diplomatic and military support for the genocide, which continues to this day. It only vaguely invoked Australia's obligations as a signatory of the United Nations convention on genocide and called for some sanctions.

Husic himself is not an anti-war figure. A member of the hawkish right-wing faction of New South Wales Labor, he began publicly referencing Gaza after he was ousted from the government cabinet in a factional reshuffle following the 2025 federal election. In explaining his motives, Husic has referenced his own identity as a Muslim of Bosnian descent. He has not connected his limited comments on Gaza to criticisms of other aspects of Australian militarism, such as its participation in the illegal war on Iran.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there was a determined campaign to prevent the motion from reaching the conference floor, extending to Labor's central leadership.

According to the *Labour Tribune* publication, "As a safeguard against one or other pulling support, two identical motions were submitted with two different seconders, Allen Hicks from the NSW ETU and Paul Garrett from the MUA

Sydney branch. But this wasn't enough to prevent Husic being 'ratf*cked'—politically betrayed at the last moment."

Hicks had apparently pulled out prior to Saturday, the final day of the conference that was to discuss foreign policy. Garrett, according to Husic, withdrew on Saturday morning. That late withdrawal not only deprived Husic of a seconder, but also made unlikely the prospect that he would be able to find another.

With their about-face, the MUA and the ETU were the last link in the chain that suppressed any debate of the Gaza genocide. In doing so, they cleared the way for the Labor leadership to glory in its embrace of militarism, without having to answer any awkward questions about their defence and support for imperialist war crimes.

On Palestine, the draft platform, effectively supporting Israel, was unaltered. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese moved for a suspension of standing orders, to facilitate a nauseating display. Josh Burns, an unabashed Zionist and federal parliamentarian, and his counterpart, Basem Abdo, of Palestinian descent, embraced on stage and delivered cynical speeches about "empathy" and "respect." Burns has been a frothing supporter of Israel, while Abdo, his background notwithstanding, has shown minimal interest in the Gaza genocide.

Defence Minister Richard Marles warned against China and hailed the deepening of Australia's alliance with US imperialism. Foreign Minister Penny Wong touted the Labor government's aggressive push to align Pacific states with the US-led war drive targeting Beijing. The day before, Marles had announced an additional \$4.6 billion in federal funding for the Osborne Shipyard in Adelaide, for future AUKUS submarine construction.

The role of the MUA and the ETU contains significant political lessons for workers and young people. Pseudo-left organisations, themselves tied to the union bureaucracy, such as Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, have hailed the MUA's posturing over the genocide. It has been presented as proof not only that there is an anti-war layer within the union officialdom, but more broadly that the unions as a whole can be transformed into "militant" organisations, as opposed to their actual role as an adjunct of governments and business.

Throughout the genocide, the Socialist Equality Party has exposed that fraud. The bluster of the MUA about Palestine has been accompanied by a refusal to take any industrial action whatsoever to block Israeli shipping or the export of Australian weapons components to the Zionist regime. The MUA has functioned as an enforcer of the orderly loading and unloading of such goods, making it complicit in the genocide itself, whatever its rhetoric.

In a statement yesterday, the MUA national leadership

declared that it did support the substance of Husic's motion, but was fearful that if it came to the floor, "pro-Israel forces" within the Labor Party would have used the debate to push for a more explicit support in the platform for the Zionist regime. Nobody is fooled by that. The MUA suppressed debate at the behest of the "pro-Israel forces" within Labor, above all Albanese, Wong and the federal leadership.

Other MUA leaders have also sought to cover their tracks. MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul Keating posted to his personal Facebook page yesterday a statement declaring "I stand unequivocally with Ed Husic and his conference motion concerning Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza..." A few days late!

Keating, affiliated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, has been among the most table-thumping demagogues on Gaza, declaring that the MUA will forever defend the Palestinians, etc. When SEP members asked him in November 2023 if the union would take industrial action against Israeli shipping, as called for by Palestinian trade unions, he responded with violent fury.

Keating's posturing is window dressing, camouflaging a commitment to enforce industrial peace on behalf of the Labor government, and a happy coexistence with more openly right-wing MUA leaders in the Labor Party. Keating's personal statement said nothing about the circumstances of the suppression of Husic's motion, including that it was his own deputy secretary of the Sydney branch who had withdrawn his second of the motion.

The union bureaucracy as a whole, whatever its rhetoric, is an arm of the state and the Labor government. It supports and defends Labor's program of imperialist war, whether openly, as in the many unions that have embraced AUKUS, or by deflecting opposition with bluster, as in the case of the MUA.

Building an anti-war movement of the working class requires a rebellion against the entire union bureaucracy, an implacable fight against the Labor government and the adoption of a socialist and internationalist perspective directed against the source of war, the capitalist system itself.



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