Australian unions distance themselves from Labor in Victorian election

Martin Scott
20 November 2026

Amid mounting anger among workers over cuts to wages, jobs and public services, several Victorian unions have declared that they will not endorse Labor in the November 28 state election and are withholding campaign funds and polling place volunteers.

Their supposed opposition to the increasingly hated Labor government is a complete fraud. None of these bureaucracies have any substantive differences with Labor or the political establishment as a whole. They have spent years ramming through the government's cuts to real wages and conditions and suppressing workers' opposition to Labor's attacks.

The metaphor that inevitably comes to mind is of rats fleeing a sinking ship, though even rodents in such straits are far more decisive that the union officials.

Under conditions where the Labor government is despised in the working class, for having presided over the meltdown of public healthcare, education and other essential services, and for imposing the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis on ordinary people, the union officials have confined themselves to the most tepid statements.

The social impulse they are responding to, moreover, is from above, not from below. The frustrations of the bureaucrats dovetail with a sense in the corporate elite that Victorian Labor is a squeezed lemon, incapable of presiding over the massive austerity measures that are being demanded. It is discussed, not only in the corporate publications, but in the Labor Party itself, that the most likely outcome of the November election will be a massive defeat.

The unions engaged in the distancing operation are primarily focussing on Premier Ben Carroll, under conditions where such a defeat would almost certainly spell the end of his political career, leaving completely open the possibility of them hailing the next Labor leader.

At the same time, while the ruling elite is considering new mechanisms for attacking the working class, sections of the union bureaucracy are themselves considering new political patrons.

The United Firefighters Union (UFU) is running a prominent campaign, including newspaper and billboard advertising and manning polling booths, urging voters to "put Labor last," and has openly promoted the far-right One Nation.

UFU Victorian Branch secretary Peter Marshall told Politico, "[One Nation's Victorian leader] Warren Pickering has made some significant statements about firefighter safety—and we support those who support us."

Marshall's statement is obscene. One Nation is an extreme right-wing, anti-working class organisation. Aside from venomous attacks on immigrants, who constitute a major section of the working class, One Nation's entire pitch is that it will completely gut regulations, boost business profits and lower wages. The idea that such a deregulation blitz will improve "safety" sounds like a sick joke.

One Nation is being promoted by sections of the ruling elite to intensify the attacks on the working class that have been spearheaded by Labor. The UFU's turn to the far-right outfit is a warning that it is fully on board with such a stepped-up offensive.

It is a deepening of the union's role in a protracted dispute, during which professional firefighters in Victoria have not had a pay increase since January 2021. In six years of enterprise bargaining, the state Labor government has refused to offer more than its sub-inflationary public sector wage rise cap. Moreover, they are working with an ageing, breakdown-prone fleet, two-thirds of which is past its service life.

For the first two years of this dispute, the UFU did not even permit a strike ballot. Instead, the bureaucracy conspired with management and the state Labor government to impose more than $200 million (according to the union's own figures) worth of "efficiencies"—that is, cuts to firefighters' conditions and entitlements.

When Labor still refused to offer a nominal pay rise over 2 percent per annum, firefighters twice voted overwhelmingly to strike, but the UFU bureaucracy prevented all but the most limited work bans and symbolic gestures.

In July 2023, the union went further and asked the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to declare the dispute "intractable," barring all industrial action and placing workers in the hands of the anti-worker tribunal. More than three years later, firefighters are still waiting on the FWC.

The UFU's campaign is the most open and overtly reactionary, but it is part of a broader shift. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which spent more than $1.6 million backing Labor in 2022, resolved on October 28 not to run a campaign this time.

The Australian Services Union (ASU) is running advertisements declaring "Ben lied. Labor lies" in Carroll's seat and those of senior ministers, over the cap on council rates that it says holds down council workers' pay.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) have all said they will not

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campaign for Labor.

None of these organisations is putting forward an alternative. This is exemplified by the Victorian Trades Hall Council, which is telling voters to "put One Nation and the Liberals last"—directing workers' votes back to Labor via preferences, while ostensibly distancing itself from the hated government.

The fact is that not only were the unions instrumental in getting the current Victorian Labor government elected—in 2022, the VTHC mobilised 700 volunteers to staff 76 polling booths for Labor—the bureaucracy is equally culpable for the deepening attack on workers' wages and conditions, which could not have been imposed without its collaboration.

From 2021 until April 2023, Labor's wages policy capped public sector pay rises at 1.5 percent a year, while inflation reached 7.8 percent. The cap was then raised to 3 percent, still well below the cost of living.

In 2022, the AEU struck a four-year schools agreement that lifted base pay by just 1 percent every six months, when inflation was already 5.1 percent. This year, after two statewide strikes, and two rejections by educators of AEU-endorsed deals, the union bureaucracy finally wore workers down and pushed through another sellout agreement.

The CPSU's 2024 public service agreement delivered 3 percent a year, exactly the government's cap. The union told members it had worked to "squeeze out the best possible outcome in the context of the government's pay policy." This cleared the way for Labor to slash some 1,000 public service jobs.

In public mental health, HACSU abandoned workers' claim for rises of at least 5 percent a year and pushed through a 2025 agreement giving allied health workers 3 percent.

The sellouts continue, even as the bureaucrats attempt to distance themselves from the detested Labor government.

At a recent meeting of more than 1,000 council workers, the ASU bureaucracy used a rigged sequence of motions to pressure workers into abandoning their wage claim, forcing a re-vote of the three councils that refused and then celebrating the railroading on social media as "member-led union democracy."

The opposition to Labor raised by the unions is explicitly conditional and limited in scope not just to Victoria, but to the premier as an individual. ASU Victorian secretary Tash Wark told the *Guardian*, "Nobody at the ASU wanted to be running ads against Labor MPs, and we don't have to if the government does the right thing."

CPSU Victorian secretary Jiselle Hanna said: "If Ben Carroll's government won't commit to no job cuts in the public service, then our union cannot support him," as if the CPSU had not been facilitating Labor's attacks on the public sector for years.

The unions' refusal to campaign for Labor is entirely compatible with their continuing service as an industrial police force, enforcing the austerity agenda of big business and government, whichever party takes office after November 28.

This is because the unions are not workers' organisations at all, but an arm of the capitalist state. They are led by a bureaucracy whose privileged existence depends on the suppression of the class struggle.

To the extent that these organisations are now distancing themselves from Labor, they are doing so to pull the wool over workers' eyes, cover over their own flirty record of betrayal and, above all, to prevent the development of a struggle against Labor and the political establishment.

Contrary to the campaigns of the union bureaucrats, what workers in Victoria confront is not unique to Carroll or the state. The wage caps, job cuts and attacks on conditions are the program of the entire Australian ruling class. The Albanese government has pursued the same agenda federally—real wage cuts, the gutting of public services and the suppression of strikes—while integrating Australia ever more deeply into US-led war preparations.

Whatever the outcome, the election will resolve nothing for workers. Labor, the Coalition and One Nation have all pledged to deepen the cuts to jobs, wages and social spending. Across Europe and around the world, workers confront the same combination of austerity, militarism and repression, and the same betrayal by the union and social-democratic apparatuses that claim to represent them. The struggles of Victorian teachers, health workers, firefighters and council workers are part of an emerging international movement of the working class.

The fight to build rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, is central to this struggle. These committees are the means by which workers break free of the bureaucracies that have suppressed their struggles and begin to formulate their own demands, share information and unite action across workplaces and industries. The building of such committees is inseparable from the building of a revolutionary party, armed with a socialist program and an international perspective, capable of uniting the struggles of workers in every industry and country and leading the working class in the fight for political power.

The SEP is standing candidates in this election—Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in Northern Metropolitan—to advance that fight, for the international unity of the working class and the socialist reorganisation of society.

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