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A year of Australia's Labor government: Militarism, austerity and "let it rip" mass death



Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese celebrates election victory in Sydney, Australia, Sunday, May 22, 2022. [AP Photo/Rick Rycroft]

Sunday marks a year since the election of the federal Labor government. More rapidly than any recent government, the Labor administration has implemented a program of reaction all down the line: a dramatic acceleration of Australian participation in US-led preparations for war, a sweeping austerity onslaught on the working class and the dismantling of any public health response to the global pandemic.

Labor has no popular mandate for this program whatsoever. It went to the election with the slogans of a "better future" and "no one left behind," only to implement policies that threaten a catastrophic nuclear war, and are resulting in immense social hardship and killing hundreds of people every week from a preventable virus.

The election underscored the immense crisis of the political establishment, and the fact that broad sections of the population recognise that there are no fundamental differences between the official parties of big business.

Labor's primary vote fell to its lowest level since 1934, with less than one in three voters casting a primary ballot for it. The swings against Labor were sharpest in working-class areas, underscoring that after decades of imposing the dictates of the corporate elite, Labor has lost any mass base in the working class. Labor only scraped into office because of the implosion of the Liberal-National Coalition's vote, with the Liberal Party in an existential crisis, wracked by rifts and conflicts at every level.

The trade unions, together with the Greens and fake-left organisations such as Socialist Alliance, peddled the lie that a Labor government would be a "lesser evil" and could be pressured to implement policies to improve the conditions of working people.

All these organisations serve to trap workers behind the sclerotic and moth-eaten political establishment. They perpetrated a conscious fraud against the population, promoting as "progressive" the most right-wing Labor government in history.

In the election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was alone in warning what was to come. Our election statement declared: "Whatever the shape of the next government—Coalition, Labor or a minority government backed by various independents—it will make the working class pay for the huge budget deficits and spiralling government debt created by pouring billions into military spending and big-business pandemic support packages. In fact, Labor leader Anthony Albanese is signalling to the ruling class that Labor is the better party to take the country to war and impose austerity."

Those messages were received by the ruling elite, with a number of the main financial newspapers endorsing Labor, and many describing former Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison as a squeezed lemon. Most significantly, on May 22, when the election result remained entirely unclear, the Murdoch-owned publications such as the *Australian* proclaimed a majority Labor government. This was a signal that whatever the election outcome, it was time for a "stable" administration to begin enforcing the dictates of the ruling class.

A government of militarism and war

And that is what Labor set about implementing. The very first act of the government, on May 23, before a majority had been secured, was to dispatch Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong to a meeting of the Quadilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) in Tokyo. They had been sworn in to an interim government just three hours before they departed.

In Japan, Albanese and Wong stood alongside President Joe Biden, as he outlined a further escalation of the US-led confrontation against China, which is viewed as the chief threat to American imperialist hegemony. The Quad is central to this program, bringing together the region's four largest military powers, the US, Australia, Japan and India, in a de facto alliance explicitly directed against Beijing.

There is no question that in Tokyo, the Labor leaders received instructions from Biden on how they were to further the anti-China campaign. And they have taken up their mission with gusto. Wong has been on an almost continuous 12-month tour of the region. She has visited every country in the Pacific and southeast Asia, hectoring and threatening their leaders that no deviation from the US confrontation will be tolerated.

At the same time, Labor has fully supported and participated in the other plank of American imperialism's global strategy, war with Russia, committing hundreds of millions of dollars to the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

Domestically, the Labor government is presiding over the largest military build-up since World War II. It is implementing AUKUS, the anti-China pact between Australia, Britain and the US, unveiled, under the Morrison government with full bipartisan support.

The sharpest expression was the March announcement, in San Diego, of the \$368 billion deal with Britain and the US for Australia's acquisition of a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

Dubbed the “apex predators of the ocean,” they are to play an offensive role throughout the region, conducting operations up to the Chinese coastal shelf in preparation for a shooting war.



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese with US President Joe Biden at Point Loma naval base, March 13, 2023, San Diego. [AP Photo/Evan Vucci]

That is only the centrepiece of a far broader militarisation. It was spelled out in the Defence Strategic Review (DSR), commissioned by the Labor government in October, conducted at record speed and released in April.

The DSR repudiated previous defence doctrines, nominally based on the defence of the relatively isolated Australian continent. Instead, the military would need “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific as the region headed towards an armed conflict. The review, fully endorsed by Labor, also insisted that this must be a “whole-of-society” and “whole-of-government” effort, a doctrine historically associated with military dictatorships which insist that every civil institution must be subordinated to the war drive.

Labor is rapidly purchasing strike missiles for all branches of the armed forces. It is also dramatically expanding US basing arrangements, including allowing potentially nuclear-armed B-52 bombers to be stationed in northern Australia. The government, it is clear, has committed to joining a US-led war with China, completing a 12-year process of militarisation carried out by successive Labor and Coalition administrations.

The implications were spelled out in the warmongering “Red Alert” series published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* last March. Its feverish war propaganda made clear that a war with China would be like nothing before in history. Old “taboos” would have to be confronted and overcome. Nuclear weapons would need to be placed in northern Australia and mass conscription introduced, in preparation for an inevitable war against China within three years.

In keeping with its alignment behind US war plans, the Albanese government has refused to demand freedom for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who faces extradition to the US and life-long imprisonment for exposing US war crimes, diplomatic conspiracies and mass surveillance.

A government of mass illness and death

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a trigger event, intensifying all the underlying contradictions of the capitalist system, including the geopolitical conflicts ushering in a new

imperialist redivision of the world. In their response, enacting policies they know will lead to millions of deaths, capitalist governments worldwide have effectively refuted claims that they would not risk a nuclear war because of the immense casualties that would result.

As on war, so on the pandemic, Labor has gone further than the previous Coalition government could have. In opposition, Labor fully supported the profit-driven lifting of most safety measures in December, 2021, leading to an Omicron tsunami engulfing the population. Since its election, Labor has dismantled even the semblance of a coordinated public health response. Labor ended any requirement for infected individuals to isolate and abolished a federal COVID leave payment. This was an edict for sick workers to remain on the job.

Labor also terminated daily reporting of COVID statistics, making it impossible to track the pandemic and keeping the population in the dark. In the latest stage of this homicidal offensive, Labor has moved to abolish more reliable Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing, instituting a requirement for a doctor's referral under conditions where decades of cuts have seen many general practitioners move away from government-subsidised bulk-billing.

In the more than two years prior to last May's election, there were 8,077 official COVID deaths. In the 12 months since Labor took office, there have been 12,480. But even this understates the true toll. Last year, there were as many as 25,000 "excess" deaths, greater than in a normal year, leading to the first sustained reduction in life expectancy since World War II.

A government of austerity and social counter-revolution

The response to the pandemic is only the most naked expression of a war on the working class. Capitalist governments around the world are inflicting massive austerity to make workers pay for the hundreds of billions given to the banks and corporations during the first two years of the COVID crisis and the immense sums being diverted to the military machine.

In this country, Labor is overseeing the deepest offensive on workers' living standards in decades. Its term in office has corresponded to the global inflation crisis, triggered by the "let it rip" COVID policies and the impact of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

Labor has backed the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA), as it has imposed 11 interest rate hikes. That has already increased the monthly repayments for an average mortgage holder by more than \$1,200. As is the case internationally, the RBA's measures have nothing to do with tackling inflation, much of which is driven by record corporate profits. Instead, the purpose is to attack wages, by driving up unemployment, even if this triggers a recession. Last year, workers were hit with the largest real wage cut in history, of 4.5 percent.

Labor is also taking the knife to social spending. Its October budget cut federal spending on the crisis ridden-public healthcare system by up to \$2.4 billion over four years. Its May budget outlined \$74 billion in cuts over the decade, especially targeting the National Disability Insurance Scheme and health, as well as education.

That budget featured "cost of living" measures that can only be described as contemptuous, summed up by an increase to the sub-poverty level unemployment payment of just \$40 a week. The supposed relief measures cost just \$14.6 billion over four years, compared with more than \$50 billion for military spending in one year and \$313 billion in stage-three tax cuts for the ultra-wealthy over the decade.

As is the case internationally, a social explosion is brewing. While untold billions are handed to the military and the corporations, levels of household debt are at record levels, poverty is soaring and workers are increasingly unable to make ends meet.

That is one of the reasons the ruling elite backed the coming to power of Labor federally, and now in all states and territories bar Tasmania. It is tasked with deepening the onslaught against the working class, in the closest of partnerships with the corporatised trade unions.

Last December, Labor passed industrial relations legislation, hailed by the unions as a “victory.” In reality, the bill provides expanded powers for the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) to impose wage and condition-cutting agreements. It includes a new clause, enabling the FWC to declare a dispute “intractable” and to enforce cuts without even a semblance of industrial democracy. This provision is already being used by the union bureaucracy to try to pressure workers to accept sell-out deals.

More broadly, the legislation further entrenches the unions in the official industrial relations framework. As the SEP alone has explained, the unions are no longer workers’ organisations in any sense of the word. They are a police force of governments and the corporations, representing the interests, not of workers, but of a privileged bureaucracy whose wealth is tied to big business profits.

In addition to working even more closely with the unions, the other difference between the Labor government and its Coalition predecessors is its aggressive deployment of identity politics. The nominal centrepiece of the government’s domestic agenda is the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined indigenous Voice to parliament.

The SEP alone has advanced a left-wing and socialist exposure of this initiative. Its transparent aim is to put a “progressive” gloss on a government of war and austerity, and to mobilise support from the affluent upper middle-class, which is indifferent to the plight of ordinary people and obsessed with issues of identity, especially those associated with race, gender and sexual orientation.

The Voice is not an exception to Labor’s reactionary agenda, but a key component of it. The Voice will do nothing to resolve the conditions of most Aboriginal people. Their horrendous plight will worsen, in line with the deteriorating conditions of the entire working class. Instead, its purpose is to elevate, ever more directly, a layer of the Aboriginal elite into the structures of the very capitalist state that presided over the massacres and dispossession of indigenous people. The Voice is aimed at dividing working people along racial lines, and pushing a “national unity,” which serves the agenda of war and seeks to suppress class divisions.

But the class struggle is and will develop rapidly. These social struggles will inevitably take the form of a fight against the Labor administrations, now in power across almost all the country. In these struggles, the SEP advances the need for rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to unite workers, disseminate information, facilitate democratic discussion and develop a unified industrial and political counter-offensive.

Perspective and program are decisive. Workers must make a break with Labor, based on an understanding that the Albanese government’s regressive program is not an aberration. It is fully in line with Labor’s history, as the preeminent party of Australian capitalism, and one that has been brought to power by the ruling elite, in all periods of social upheaval and war.

The alternative is the socialist and internationalist program that Labor was founded to oppose. Such a program is aimed at uniting workers globally, in a common struggle against the capitalist system itself—the source of war, inequality and authoritarianism. Socialism is possible and necessary. But it must be fought for. Concretely, that means building a new revolutionary leadership in the working class. We appeal to all workers, students and young people to draw the necessary conclusions and join the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.