



**Beyond Labor: the need
for an independent
working class agenda**

Learn from Labor in office and build our own agenda

Labor Governments have already been tossed out of office in several states.

The remaining Federal and state Labor governments face the same prospect.

Most people are sadly disillusioned with them. They have failed to deliver any significant improvement in the lives of working Australians. The current Federal Government is just administering the current system, preaching “financial responsibility” as it cuts social services, allows the anti-worker and anti-union Work Choices policies and structures of the previous Liberal government to largely continue, slavishly obeys the dictates of the United States as it gears up for its looming confrontation with China by stationing thousands more US troops here, and drags its feet, leaving Australian soldiers to die in Afghanistan

Similarly, State Labor governments merely administer the same system. They have led the charge to privatise public assets, most recently for example, the rail, roads, ports and forests in Queensland, and the forests in south east SA. As the capitalist system lurches toward further crisis, governments have less and less room

to manoeuvre to raise funds, and are pressured and required to use public funds, i.e. taxpayers’ money, to subsidise businesses, such as the car industry, and to fund private bailouts, as occurred in the Global Financial Crisis. Governments around the world are attacking the rights and welfare of their people (Greece and Spain are the current topical examples). Australian governments are doing the same, even though the severity of the attacks has not yet reached the European levels.

While the current crisis is becoming more and more severe, the record of Labor in office in the history of Australia has always been essentially the same: administer the system on behalf of the rich, obey the dictates of the capitalist class in order to stay in office, and always pretend that this is in the national interest i.e. the interests of all Australians, not only the rich.

Curtin & Chifley (now romantic legends) invited US domination of Australia after World War 2, virtually financing the private GMH with public funds, creating the spy organisation ASIO, and even using troops to smash the national coal strike.

The Whitlam Government, riding a surge of popular demands and expectations which it could not deny, initially introduced some progressive changes such as Medibank, free

tertiary education and withdrawal from the Vietnam War. However, over time, it became more and more reactionary, and ultimately attacked the unemployed, coining the term “dole bludgers”.

The Hawke and Keating governments floated the Australian currency and deregulated the banks, so that profits could be maximised. The Hawke Labor Government used the military to smash the national pilots strike.

The record shows that all Labor Governments essentially administer and serve the capitalist system and those who have economic, political and media power. They change nothing fundamentally, and have helped to run a system that has recently seen the greatest transfer of wealth from the majority to the rich minority in the history of this country.

Labor Governments usually ride a popular tide into government, with people expecting significant change for the better. Labor makes populist promises, and even implements some, especially in the early days of office. However, Labor governments become increasingly conservative as they take the decisions needed to run capitalism i.e. to promote the interests of the rich, and as they desperately try to stay in office.

The powers that be rein them in; the conservative public service

leadership captures them (as in Yes Minister). The corporations and their organisations such as the Business Council of Australia hedge them in with limited choices; lobby, bribe and threaten the governments, threatening antagonistic campaigns (eg the mining lobby), painting fearful scenarios of withdrawal of investment, warning that they will take their funds to other cheaper countries if Labor doesn't follow traditional, capitalist policies.

Labor politicians increasingly accept the limitations of running the system, as admitted quite explicitly by former senior Labor federal minister Lindsay Tanner on Q & A recently.

In order to keep the spoils of office, all politicians, Liberal and Labor, curry favour with the powerful, especially the media barons, to try to get a good press.

Some Labor politicians have always been craven opportunists and careerists. Remember Bill Shorten reporting the step by step leadership struggle against Rudd to the US embassy.

Some become increasingly right wing as they are captured by their constituencies eg Martin Ferguson, who effectively became the Minister for the Mining Companies.

Some good people get corrupted by the superficiality of the parliamentary

game, and think the sideshows and point scoring are actually the substance of running the country.

Other good people keep trying, but are essentially blunted because the system is too big and strong and all pervasive to achieve significant change.

The parliamentary political game of point-scoring, one-up-man ship and constant dishonest spin has sunk to lower and lower levels. The 5-second grab, written by some spin doctor, is more important than substantial policies, or honestly discussing issues, admitting and learning from mistakes, and working out solutions. Governments play it safe to avoid stimulating opposition; there is virtually no leadership, no vision of social reform. Witness Gillard jumping immediately to rule out gay marriage or a more realistic, sensible approach to the problem of drugs, to avoid any political difficulties caused by taking a stand for progress. What has happened to her supposedly progressive views? These and other stances make a mockery of the so-called "Left" faction in the Labor Party.

Although the media spotlight focuses on individual politicians, it is important to focus on the system and its institutions: parliament, the political parties, the public service, the media, and also the powers behind the scenes – the corporations,

the police and the armed forces.

It is power, the structures, that matter.

Personalities are not important in this greater scheme of things.

Julia Gillard is the first female prime minister of Australia. That did represent progress. However nothing substantial has changed for the Australian people, especially for Australian women.

It is true that reactionary politicians and commentators have directed disgustingly sexist denigration at Gillard. This exposes their narrow, bigoted, sexist ideologies and opportunist, dishonest character.

And it also exposes again the shallow, unprincipled parliamentary game of point-scoring, off-the-record denigration and slander, a game played willingly by both Liberals and Labor. This has been as much a feature of the Gillard-Rudd contests as it has been of the Gillard-Abbott contest.

Some people run for parliamentary office, claiming they want to change the system. However, the system usually ends up changing them.

Gillard has clearly sold her soul to get and keep office. She did a deal with the mining companies to reduce the mining tax, and, in return, Rudd was axed, she got the job and the mining companies toned down their

anti-government campaign for a while. Of course their greed led them to ramp it again later.

Labor's Recent Record

The Labor Government champions US control of Australia, follows the US/NATO military invasion of Afghanistan, sending Australian soldiers to their deaths for no valid purpose other than to follow the US, and to avoid admitting that it was all a mistake.

Actual government support for renewable energy is steadily declining. The carbon tax was a policy based on the need for some action, a reading of the international trends in other economies, and the need for business to have a firm clear environment to enable future investment planning. However, as usual, the reality has been trimmed and trimmed. Now, the big polluters receive generous subsidies to keep their polluting power stations going ("too expensive to phase out"), AND they pass increasing costs onto households.

The mining tax started at a proposed rate of 40%, and then, after the mining companies did a deal with Gillard to axe Rudd, was reduced to 22.5%, and only on those iron ore and coal mining operations that generate over \$75 million p.a. Now, through the usual range of accounting measures, taxpayer subsidies and

policy erosion, the mining companies informed the tax office that they will pay ZERO mining tax for the first quarter of the financial year. All this while the mining companies make regular massive profits.

And, in order to impress "financial markets" ie the banks and financial companies, the Federal Labor Government poses as "financially responsible", and even pursued a budget surplus until that proved impossible.

And who pays? The Australian people. The Single Parent allowance has been changed with some 100,000 single parents losing between \$65 and \$115 per week after being changed to the Newstart allowance. The Baby Bonus is cut, with some 87,000 families losing \$2000 per second and subsequent child.

Labor promises on education funding and the National Disability Insurance Scheme are, at this stage, worthy but are yet to be transformed into real resources. The oft-repeated record suggests that they will be whittled away unless there are powerful public campaigns to force whichever party is in office to honour the policies.

Spot the Difference

The Liberals policies are basically the same, but they emphasise essentially minor differences in their quest for the plums of office. Abbott

is seen by most as having secret ultra-reactionary views (eg denial of global warming) which he tries to hide by constantly sniping at the government (even though his true views often slip out of his big mouth). However, his obnoxious character and dishonesty cannot lead us to ignore Labor's equally important failings.

We should not be sucked in by the media focus on these petty differences and fights in the gold fish bowl; while there may be tactical differences and some policy differences, both parties fail to address the fundamental issues facing the Australian people.

On all key fundamental issues the Liberals are similar to Labor. They may be more overtly elitist on education funding, and even more uninterested in environmental sustainability, but their actual decisions in office would probably be not much different overall.

Some of the most important differences among politicians at the moment reflect the growing struggle for economic supremacy, and therefore, political and military supremacy, between the US and China. Labor has welded itself onto the US, but some Liberals and business people are advocating a more even-handed or farsighted approach to accommodate the growing superpower, so that more money can be made. NSW Premier O'Farrell even advocated the writing

of NSW contracts with China in Chinese Yuan – a massive challenge to supremacy of the US dollar. (The US can only keep its massively debt-ridden head above water as long as the dollar is the currency of international exchange – that way the US Govt can keep printing dollars without having to account for their lack of real value. As the world moves toward writing commercial contracts in Chinese Yuan or an alternative basket of currencies, the value of the dollar will steadily fall, and the US debt crisis will come closer and closer to the predicaments of Greece and Spain.) Some capitalists are already advocating moving closer to China (eg James Packer, Kerry Stokes and Clive Palmer). Barnaby Joyce opposes selling Australian enterprises, especially agricultural assets, to Chinese companies, but it is unclear whether he is expressing a degree of nationalism, or only opposes selling to the Chinese, and that selling our assets to other, white, imperialists is OK.

So both parties operate completely within the capitalist system, but the parties, or various leaders and politicians within the parties, express views that represent either diverse or conflicting interests of different capitalists, industries or capitalist powers, or they reflect the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the system that leave them with constant policy dilemmas and conundrums that have no solution.

In recent decades, the purported differences between Labor and Liberal have narrowed, to become almost unrecognisable. There are often greater differences among the politicians within each party than between the parties themselves.

What To Do?

Some activists have issued calls to “Take back our Labor Party” to “make Labor again a real party of labour”. This sentiment was particularly pronounced in South Australia when a union-led campaign successfully led to the replacement of the Rann-Foley leadership by the SA Labor Left’s Jay Weatherill. The Rann Government was arrogant, bullying, and openly pro-big business, and had alienated the vast majority of South Australians, so the party reluctantly turned to the “left” Weatherill, to change its image in an attempt to win the next election.

Those initially involved developing the strategy were well aware of the futility of relying on the ALP to bring an end to capitalism. While some believed restoring labour values was what the campaign was about others understood it was more about maintaining and creating unity within the union movement and restoring a sense of power through common struggle. They put before those involved with the ALP that there were other options than just rolling over and accepting bad decisions by

Labor in government. Doing nothing because it was a Labor government was not an option.

History may well prove that just replacing leaders is ultimately a dead end yet the activities surrounding the change in this case were well deserved and intentional.

The alternative to not attempting to change leaders is to allow the negative belief that nothing can ever be done even within the system and union officials and their members will just have to put up with whatever is forced onto them. This is particularly so when we are dealing with people who have always believed that the ALP is the answer to rectifying the evils of capitalism.

Attempting to find and encourage limited solutions to issues within the system has a rational basis through exposure of the system and eventually understanding the futility of finding solutions through the parliamentary process.

This was in marked contrast to the way in which the union movement allowed the ALP and the ACTU to dismantle the successful organizational structures developed through the anti-WorkChoices campaign.

The Weatherill government has been much more reasonable than its predecessors but has still adopted a

series of measures to try to manage a failing capitalist system, i.e. axing another 1800 public service jobs, cut backs to environmental sustainability measures, including state government money to the Murray River being halved, and maintenance of decisions to sell –off public assets such as the south-east forests and now public buildings. So, well-intentioned or not, Governments are boxed in, and cannot make decisions that serve the interests of the Australian people.

Their System Rules

The Whitlam Labor Government became steadily more conservative, but was still regarded as too liberal and unreliable by these real powers, especially the US Government and corporations. It had been flirting with the possibility of raising funds outside US-dominated financial circles to start to “buy back the farm” ie regain some Australian ownership of our resources. The Attorney-General had led a raid on ASIO because it refused to accept Australian governmental control. And the western financial world, under the aegis of the OECD, was about to embark on a historic mission to cut public spending and social services to transfer maximum profit back to the corporations. So the Whitlam government was turfed out of office in a constitutional coup – strictly legal but completely outside the accepted parliamentary processes and conventions. And the Labor Party essentially failed to

resist; it did not mobilise the people but counselled them to control their rage.

In the same year, the elected Allende government in Chile was implementing slightly more independent and progressive policies, so the US engineered a military coup to overthrow the government, and institute a vicious fascist dictatorship.

Both these experiences show the essential powerlessness of the parliamentary system to buck imperialist rule and make fundamental changes for the benefit of the population.

The Chavez government in Venezuela, on the other hand, has mobilised the population to act and defend progressive changes, against the subversion of local and US capital. It remains to be seen whether the traditional powerful institutions of the Venezuelan capitalist state have been defeated or controlled sufficiently to prevent a counter-coup.

In Australia’s history, new parliamentary parties have occasionally sprung up because of popular disillusionment with Liberal and Labour. We have had the Liberal Movement, the Australian Democrats and now the Greens. They wither because the parliamentary system does not allow effective challenge to

the fundamental causes of the issues and problems facing Australia ie the capitalist system.

So, history proves that this approach is a dead end.

The Labor Party has never been an organisation that challenges the root causes of Australian workers' problems. It will never meet Australian people's needs because it operates within the capitalist system, and never challenges private ownership of wealth and power.

Capitalism is based on exploiting workers' labour to make private profit. Capital is always invested wherever it can make the most profit, usually in the shortest time. The system has reached a point where the vast bulk of investment is in financial speculation that produces nothing of value and does not provide or create jobs, and also in production in the cheapest, most exploitative countries around the globe, destroying jobs in developed countries like Australia, and forcing workers in the underdeveloped world to sweat in precarious, dangerous, terribly paid jobs.

This long-term trend in the development of capitalism exploded in the Global Financial Crisis in 2008. The gigantic gambling casino that modern financial capitalism has become started to collapse like the flimsily built pack of cards that it

is. The system's only way out was to buy a bit more time by using government money i.e. taxpayers' money, to bail out banks, finance companies and insurance companies and some industrial giants, so their shareholders and lenders could minimise their losses, and the whole interdependent financial web could be propped up.

This had two key outcomes.

It transferred the burden to the public, since governments now have to meet their debts by screwing their peoples, by increasing taxes, cutting jobs and pensions, cutting services, extending working hours and working lives, and selling off public assets. Austerity measures imposed on the people of various European countries typify this approach.

The other impact, yet to be fully felt, is the potential for massive inflation; governments, especially the US Government, just printed or borrowed the trillions that were handed over to the capitalists. This money, without equivalent real value, is sloshing around, but little is being used to generate value in the form of industrial or agricultural production i.e. it is money not based on concrete value.

The serious environmental crisis facing the planet and its populations (human, animal and botanical) has largely been caused by unplanned,

greedy development driven by profit. Capitalism is essentially impossible to plan because immediate profit is everything, so strategic planning and action, and socially and environmentally fair and responsible decisions and policies, are precluded. The environmental crisis cannot be solved under a profit-driven capitalist system

Labor offers no serious challenge to any of this.

In its history, when out of office, there have been occasional expressions of challenge, to gain credibility with the people. However, when admitted to office, any such challenges are quickly snuffed out by the combined might of the rich and wealthy, the public service and media barons.

Any Government or politician who maintains even a slight independence or challenge is ridiculed and pilloried in the media, and set up for electoral annihilation. Witness the constant media ridicule of the “loony” Greens.

And Labor has no defence against this because it always tries to run the system, rather than building a mass movement or popular action to support better policies.

Australian workers have experienced this scenario many times. Labor has been repeatedly ditched out of office as people become totally disillusioned, betrayed and angry.

However, we also suffer from a lack of a viable alternative, and each time most disillusioned people eventually drift back to Labor “because that is all there is”, and the same cycle repeats itself.

It is clear that capitalism must be replaced, if the earth is to survive and the world’s people are to be able to live decent lives.

Labor, or any other parliamentary party, cannot and will never achieve this for Australia.

We need to build our own alternatives.

Firstly, people need to build their own independent organisations to fight for their own interests and rights. The parliamentary parties will not do this, although when in opposition, they will always try to ride on the backs of people’s action for their own purposes. Organisations such as trade unions, community and residents groups, environment organisations and cultural groups are active everywhere, defending our rights and interests, but they often focus on individual issues, and on largely defensive fights or struggles to achieve marginal improvements.

These groups and struggles need to be brought together in a mass movement to defend people’s rights and interest, a People’s Rights Movement, with a broader agenda to

achieve fundamental change in the economic and political and cultural structures of our country.

That is why we call for the development and promotion of an independent working class agenda, one that can be embraced by the unions and community organisations and around which the working class can mobilise to pursue its own objectives.

It must incorporate the immediate demands of the people for improved living standards and for the protection and extension of their rights and liberties.

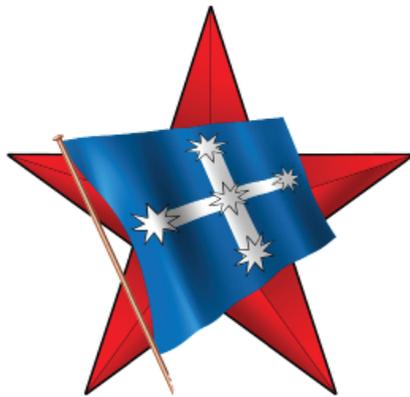
It need not at this stage be a formal document to which various organisations must commit, but there will inevitably be a central core of immediate demands that are put forward in various ways.

The people through their organisations must have the capacity to struggle independently of whatever party of capitalism is given the task of holding back and preventing such struggle.

It must incorporate the immediate demands of the people for improved living standards and for the protection and extension of their rights. It must seek to claw back for the people's welfare the wealth that sits obscenely in the hands of the corporations and the rich.

This will involve fundamental change, and the privileged and powerful who own and control Australia, will resist viciously.

And we need to further develop the vision of the sort of society we wish to create to replace decrepit, destructive, selfish capitalism. The great revolutions of the twentieth century, in Russia and China, were very successful in some ways, but quite unsatisfactory in others, ultimately failed and collapsed. We need to analyse and understand exactly why they failed, to learn from the positives and negatives, in order to build our vision of an independent and socialist society that will successfully develop and maintain a just, equitable, democratic, ecologically sustainable future appropriate for Australia.



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