

Australian election: Why the silence on industrial relations?

By Terry Cook
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With just a day to go to the Australian federal election, so-called “industrial relations reform” has hardly rated a mention by either the Liberal or Labor parties. Yet in the weeks leading up to the campaign, it appeared that Prime Minister John Howard was determined to make anti-union rhetoric central to his re-election bid.

Back then, the government was thrashing around for an issue to divert public attention from the deepening social problems, corporate collapses and wholesale job destruction that had already resulted in a string of defeats for the Liberals in state elections and by-elections.

Desperate, and devoid of any policies to address growing social discontent, the government turned to an age-old diversion. It began to beat the anti-union drum. Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott announced that the government, acting on allegations of union thuggery and corruption in the construction industry, would launch a royal commission into the industry, particularly the activities of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The plan was to conjure up an anti-union atmosphere that could be exploited in the weeks leading up to the election. However, following the *Tampa* refugee affair and the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, this strategy was quickly abandoned in favour of playing the race and war cards.

As if he had momentarily forgotten his script, Howard’s anti-union tub-thumping briefly reappeared during his only televised debate with Labor leader Kim Beazley. Asked to nominate his greatest fear if Labor were to win the poll, Howard claimed that “the boys and girls of the union movement and the union bosses would make whoopee”. Beazley immediately offered his reassurances. “The PM’s fears are unfounded,” he

replied.

The ALP leader’s response was not hard to fathom. Despite tactical disagreements around the edges, the Labor Party is equally committed to suppressing strikes, cutting real wages and driving down working conditions. It has pledged to retain the government’s Workplace Relations Act with minor changes.

The truth is Howard’s anti-union crusade was largely dead in the water from the very beginning. The government’s pitch was mostly ignored by big business, which knew it had nothing to fear from totally compliant and tame-cat unions, and failed to generate the desired hysteria among traditional anti-union constituencies. Small business employers were more angry about the crippling impact of the new Goods and Services Tax on their businesses. In rural and regional areas, the hostility was over bank branch closures, declining communication services, job losses and the destruction of social programs.

Any concerns in corporate circles that the previous Labor government’s defeat in 1996 and Howard’s victory would see a revival of union-led militancy have been long laid rest by the unions’ role over the past six years.

When thousands of angry workers protesting the Howard government’s draconian first budget and its proposed Workplace Relations Act stormed federal parliament in Canberra in August 1996, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and its affiliates joined the government and the Labor leaders in viciously condemning workers for “instigating violence”.

The ACTU and the unions signalled their willingness to collaborate with the Liberals by dropping their opposition to the legislation and joining the Australian Democrats to broker a deal with the government to

allow a slightly amended version to pass through the Senate. From then on, the unions have faithfully acted in compliance with the new laws.

When the Liberals orchestrated an attempt by Patrick Stevedores to de-unionise the waterfront in 1998, provoking a nationwide dispute, the unions demonstrated that they could be relied on to suppress industrial action and deliver the labour flexibility, job cuts and productivity levels demanded by big business.

Patrick's military-style operation, using a small army of hooded security guards accompanied by dogs to drive waterfront workers from the docks in the middle of the night, provoked outrage among working people. Mass pickets developed at Patrick terminals around the country, despite attempts by the union leaders to contain the situation.

The ensuing debacle required the intervention of the Federal and High Courts. They ordered the reinstatement of the 1,400 sacked workers and, in effect, instructed the company to enter discussions with the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) to end the dispute.

While the ACTU hailed the outcome as a major victory for waterfront workers, because the MUA remained intact, the unions delivered the sweeping changes and productivity increases sought by the company and the government. Patrick Stevedores was permitted to shed half its workforce and vastly increase the use of contract and casual labour. Crane rates were soon driven up from 18 containers an hour to a new benchmark of 25.

Since then, similar productivity levels have been imposed via the unions across a range of key industries, including mining, telecommunications and manufacturing. Major companies have largely abandoned their efforts to utilise the Workplace Relations Act to de-unionise the workforce.

Given the track record of the unions, big employers have shown little enthusiasm for Howard's election proposals, such as requiring secret ballots for strikes and exempting small businesses from the extremely limited unfair dismissal laws. These measures are mainly aimed at placating small business concerns, while tightening the screws a little further on the already servile unions.

For its part, the ALP has courted big business by pledging to retain a "non-union stream" of workplace

agreements, as well as the outlawing of sympathy and solidarity strikes under the so-called secondary boycott provisions. It has promised to hand these powers to the Industrial Relations Commission—strengthening the industrial court's capacity to order the end of sympathy strikes and instigate legal action against striking workers.

It is common knowledge that 13 years of Labor government before 1996 paved the way for Howard's industrial relations legislation. Labor's Prices and Incomes Accord with the ACTU committed the unions to disciplining the most militant sections of the working class and to subordinating workers to the drive to make Australian industry "internationally competitive". The unions imposed enterprise bargaining, the direct forerunner of Howard's non-union "Australian Workplace Agreements".

When the Australian Bureau of Statistics released data at the beginning of this month showing that the number of working days lost due to industrial action dropped by 51 percent in 2000-2001, falling from 768,100 to 374,000, Howard claimed the result was the outcome of his industrial policy. The ALP spokesman was quick to boast that the Labor government had initiated the decline.

The underlying reason for the election silence on industrial relations is somewhat obvious. Whichever party forms government after November 10, its agenda will be determined by the deepening global slump and the demands of big business. This will require the removal of all restrictions on companies' ability to quickly shed labour, cut wages and increase working hours. The ALP and the unions have demonstrated, time and again, that they will comply.

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