

Australian Council of Trade Unions launches cynical campaign against casual employment

By Oscar Grenfell
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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the national union umbrella organisation, has said it will campaign in 2018 for changes to industrial legislation, with the purported aim of reversing the dramatic growth of casual employment.

This campaign, announced last month, forms part of a broader strategy, initiated by ACTU secretary Sally McManus, to present the unions as opponents of social inequality, corporate tax cuts and mounting poverty.

Confronted by rising social and class tensions, the ACTU's posturing is aimed at channeling the widespread disaffection among workers and young people back behind the unions and the Labor Party, of which McManus is a prominent member. It is also an attempt to head-off a deepening crisis of the unions, whose membership in the private sector is estimated to have fallen to a record low of 10 percent of the workforce.

Announcing the campaign, McManus cited official figures indicating that at least 2.5 million workers are employed on a casual basis, without the rights or entitlements of permanent workers. She declared that the unions were seeking to include a definition of casual employment in the Fair Work Australia industrial legislation that would entitle casuals who work regular full-time shifts to gain permanency.

The ACTU campaign is an exercise in utter hypocrisy. McManus was silent on the fact that the last Labor government introduced the draconian Fair Work Australia regime, with the full support of the unions.

The Fair Work laws ban virtually all industrial action outside proscribed "enterprise bargaining" periods, and include numerous mechanisms that major companies have exploited to slash jobs and wages, and erode conditions, including through the expansion of casual employment.

The Fair Work legislation is the continuation of a three-and-a-half decade offensive against the social rights of the working class, spearheaded by successive Labor governments and the trade unions.

The dramatic increase in casual employment began under the federal Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, in office from 1983 to 1996.

In those years, Labor and the unions took their nationalist and pro-capitalist program to its logical conclusion. Amid the rise of globally-mobile capital, they dispensed with seeking limited reforms, and became the chief proponents of ensuring that their "own" national industries remained "internationally competitive," through the continuous lowering of real wages and working conditions.

The Hawke and Keating governments, and the ACTU, struck a series of pro-business Accords with the major corporations, aimed at dismantling national economic regulations. These resulted in not just dramatic falls in wages and conditions, but also the destruction of entire sections of industry considered insufficiently profitable by the wealthiest shareholders. Hundreds of thousands of full-time jobs were destroyed, including in major industries such as car manufacturing, steel production, telecommunications and mining.

The job cuts went hand in hand with a dramatic increase in part-time, casual and precarious work.

The Keating government, with the full collaboration of the ACTU and all its affiliates, also introduced the "enterprise bargaining" system in the early 1990s, under which agreements are signed by the unions and the employers at individual workplaces. This was aimed at atomising workers, and creating the conditions for regressive company-union deals.

According to modelling by academic Barbara

Pocock, casual employment grew by 4.7 percent under Hawke and 5.3 percent under Keating. Casual work as a proportion of total employment grew from a relatively static 13 percent before 1983, to over 22 percent in 1996, when Labor was ousted from office. The increase continued under John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition government, and the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, reaching 25 percent by 2011.

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the statistics likely understate the shift to "precarious" work, because they do not include illegal "cash in hand" employment, which is not reported to the authorities.

The Rudd and Gillard governments broadened the pro-business agenda of Hawke, Keating and Howard, carrying out sweeping market restructuring of the health, education and welfare sectors. As a result of Labor's "education revolution," which was supported by the academic and teaching unions, casualisation rates at universities increased from around 40 percent in 2000, to more than half of teaching and research staff last year.

The unions have been central to the casualisation drive in every industry. From the 1990s onward, they signed innumerable enterprise agreements, providing for increased casualisation and significant cuts to casual wages.

Led by current Labor leader Bill Shorten, the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the country's largest, struck numerous deals over a decade, beginning in 1998, slashing the pay and conditions of some of the most exploited workers.

In 1998, the AWU signed a pact with Cleanevent, eliminating penalty wages for hundreds of cleaners and placing them on a base rate of just \$14.70 an hour, including for night and weekend work. The deal reportedly saved the company up to \$400 million.

A 2004 agreement between the AWU and farming company Chiquita mushrooms reclassified hundreds of low-paid workers as "independent contractors," effectively rendering them casual employees without any rights.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), a union that covers retail workers, has imposed dozens of wage-cutting agreements. An investigation by Fairfax Media last year reported that

as many as 250,000 supermarket, retail and fast food workers were likely paid below the mandated minimum wage because of regressive SDA deals.

Last month, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported that the SDA and Woolworths, a supermarket chain, had struck a new agreement covering 400 warehouse workers. While the union and the company have sought to keep the pay rates secret, they are allegedly \$1.50 less than other supermarket workers, or up to \$3,000 less per year, per worker.

McManus has explicitly defended the SDA's wage-cutting agreements. Last June, she declared that casual hospitality workers, who receive as little as \$10 an hour, were among "the best-paid fast food workers in the world."

Every other major union, including those that posture as "militant," is implicated in the expansion of casualisation. In 2015, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) sold out industrial action by Hutchison stevedoring workers, pushing through 60 sackings. A handful of those who lost their job were rehired as casuals.

With the final closure of the Australian car industry last year, overseen by the ACTU and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, rates of unemployment and casualisation will grow further. Tens of thousands of flow-on sackings in the car components industry will stoke a stepped-up offensive against the working class by the corporate elite.

Underlying the perfidious actions of the unions is their transformation into an industrial police force of big business. Their record makes clear that a genuine struggle against casualisation, and other cuts to conditions, can be waged only in opposition to these thoroughly corporatised organisations.

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