

# Labor leader makes phony populist pitch at Australian election launch

By Oscar Grenfell  
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Labor leader Bill Shorten made a cynical populist pitch to growing social discontent at the party's official election launch in Brisbane last Sunday. At the same time, he sought to reassure the corporate elite that Labor could form a stable government committed to defending the interests of big business.

Shorten's duplicitous appeal reflected fears within Labor and the political establishment as a whole over seething anger among broad sections of the working class. Amid record low wage growth, mounting unemployment and social distress, the election campaign has been dominated by hostility to all the major parties.

Less than two weeks before the ballot is to be held, polling indicates that neither Labor nor the Liberal-National Coalition are on track to win a clear majority. The balance of power in the Senate, parliament's upper house, will most likely be controlled by right-wing populists and so-called independents.

"If we win this election, our priority is not making the rich very richer. It is getting wages moving again for working people," Shorten declared. He called for people to "Vote for a Labor government to put the health of Australians ahead of the tax rorts at the top end of town."

The policies he outlined, however, made clear that this is so much hot air. Labor is absurdly claiming that paltry budget allocations to health and a miniscule increase in tax collected from multinational corporations, will resolve the deepening social crisis confronting millions of working people.

The bogus character of Labor's promises was made clear by the headline announcement of the launch: a supposed \$500 million spend to improve hospital emergency waiting times.

Shorten cited figures showing that less than two thirds of patients who arrive at an emergency department, and whose medical condition is deemed urgent, are triaged within the recommended period.

He did not mention that this was a product of sweeping cuts to health funding by successive state and federal governments, including the closure of hundreds of hospital beds, by the previous federal Labor government, in which he was a senior minister.

Half of the emergency department funding came from the \$2.8 billion "Better Hospitals Funding," which Labor had already announced. Moreover, the spending is being rolled out over six years, thus amounting to less than \$500 million per year across the country.

Parts of the \$500 million emergency department funding are earmarked for six years, others for four. A substantial portion of the money will not even be spent in the next term of government. In other words, even the inadequate sums outlined by Labor may not ever reach a hospital.

According to the Australian Associated Press, Labor's expenditure, if it does go ahead, will amount to just \$160 million over six years for emergency departments in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state. This would be the equivalent of 211 beds, 586 doctors or 1,200 nurses, under conditions of a rapid population growth and a mounting hospitals crisis.

In South Australia, only \$35 million would be spent over six years, funding 36 beds, 99 doctors or 202 nurses. A report by the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine late last year found the state had the highest emergency department waiting times in the country, at over three hours. As in other states, ambulances routinely park outside emergency departments for hours with patients still inside, due to a lack of beds.

Shorten's other pledges were no less hollow. He claimed that a Labor government would restore weekend and overtime penalty rates to some low-paid workers, after they were cut by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) in 2017. It was the previous Labor government, however, which created the pro-business FWC and included

penalty rates in a list of award entitlements to be “reviewed,” i.e., slashed.

As the former leader of the Australian Workers Union, Shorten is himself implicated in regressive enterprise agreements, which stripped cleaners and other low-paid workers of their penalty rates.

Shorten demagogically denounced multinational companies for failing to pay taxes. He pathetically declared that Labor would tighten tax collection rates to net \$680 million over forward estimates. This would represent a tiny fraction of the multi-billion dollar annual profits of such companies.

The only concrete policies outlined by Shorten, not based on smoke and mirrors, were a series of tax cuts and cash handouts to big business.

A Labor government will create an Australian Investment Guarantee allowing businesses to immediately deduct 20 percent of any new investment worth more than \$20,000 from their taxes. In a separate scheme, companies with an annual turnover of less than \$10 million will be eligible for a 30 percent tax deduction for up to five new workers’ salaries.

Shorten proclaimed that these measures would result in an expansion of full-time, well-paid employment. He made no attempt to substantiate these assertions. In reality, the policies are a transparent pitch to business and will do nothing to reverse declining wages, growing casualisation and increasingly onerous working conditions.

Shorten declared Labor’s policies would be “a win for business, a win for the workers and a win for the economy as a whole.” He also invoked the legacy of the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, in office from 1983-1996.

The Hawke and Keating governments presided over a series of Accords with big business and the trade unions. These deregulated the economy, smashed up shop stewards committees and other workers’ organisations and destroyed hundreds of thousands of jobs across manufacturing.

Shorten’s veiled references to this record, further underscore that a Labor government would seek to make the working class pay for the deepening crisis of Australian capitalism.

The launch was attended by the past three Labor prime ministers, Keating, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Rudd sat next to Gillard, who ousted him as prime minister in a backroom coup in June 2010. Shorten hailed the “unity” of the Labor Party that was on display.

This was aimed at signalling to the corporate elite that a Labor government would be a stable instrument that could govern in its interests. Shorten contrasted the supposed unity with the deep-going divisions within the Coalition.

His claims lay in tatters as soon as the launch was over. Keating approached the media to denounce the intelligence agencies for spearheading a McCarthyite campaign against “Chinese influence” in Australia. He said that the intelligence chiefs had gone “berko” in their approach to China, and denounced them as “nutters.”

Keating’s comments expressed the fears of a section of the ruling elite that Australia’s integration into the US confrontation with Beijing threatens lucrative trade and business relationships with China.

Shorten immediately distanced himself from Keating’s statements, and pledged his fealty to the intelligence agencies. Revealing deep rifts within Labor, prominent MP Anthony Albanese, who has previously contested for the party’s leadership against Shorten, implicitly defended Keating’s comments saying they expressed “broader concerns.”

The furore, which is part of a debate within the ruling elite over how best to advance the interests of Australian imperialism, lifted the lid on one of the great unmentionables of the election campaign: the bipartisan commitment to place Australia on the frontlines of US preparations for a war with China that threatens a catastrophe.

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