

Australian union boss Sally McManus defends government attack on construction workers

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13 September 2024

In a video statement posted to social media on Monday, Sally McManus, secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), aggressively defended sweeping attacks on the basic rights of construction workers implemented last month by the federal Labor government.

The video ended a guilty silence that McManus and other ACTU bureaucrats maintained for the best part of a fortnight.

Having assisted the government to place the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under administration on August 23, McManus and other ACTU officials said nothing for weeks. The silence was maintained even as tens of thousands of construction workers took to the streets to oppose the administration, a form of de facto state dictatorship over the union, and as the financial press crowed that the arrangement would help to slash wages and conditions in the sector.

In her video, McManus evaded all of these substantive issues. Acting as a mouthpiece of the government, property developers and construction companies, the union boss asserted that administration was necessary because of allegations that CFMEU construction officials had ties to criminals and had potentially engaged in illegal activity themselves.

McManus prefaced her remarks by informing the viewer, “I want to tell it to you straight, which means getting it warts and all.” She continued, “Some individuals in the construction division of the CFMEU have had serious allegations against them. We’re not talking about small things, we’re talking about criminal activity.”

The video spanned almost five minutes, but its contents were not substantially greater than those two sentences. McManus, a colourless bureaucrat, droned on about criminality and its purported incompatibility with the “trade union movement.”

Having begun with a suggestion that her remarks would shed new or greater light on the situation, McManus simply repeated the assertions against the CFMEU construction division contained in articles first published by Nine Media outlets two months ago and picked up by the government.

There was an obvious contradiction. While McManus uncritically repeated these claims from the corporate media and the big business Labor government, she was compelled to acknowledge that at this point, they were “allegations,” i.e., entirely unproven and untested. How then did they justify punitive state action against not only CFMEU leaders, but the 80,000 construction workers whose union is now under administration headed by a government-appointed lawyer with dictatorial powers over the organisation?

McManus explained that working with the government, the ACTU had proposed to the CFMEU that it voluntarily accept administration.

The construction officials, she asserted, had rejected this course of action, forcing the government to pass extraordinary legislation to forcefully impose the administration. Even in this telling, McManus and the ACTU officials were acting as the agents of the government and the state.

It is public knowledge, however, that the CFMEU was cooperating with the imposition of administration. After the legislation was passed, leading CFMEU bureaucrats complained that it cut across their negotiations with the Fair Work Commission to install a third-party administrator under existing laws.

John Setka, the previous head of the CFMEU’s Victorian construction division has alleged that there was a deal in place, involving McManus, under which the union would not be placed under administration if he and several other controversial leaders of the CFMEU resigned. Setka, who had foreshadowed his resignation at the beginning of the year, left the union, prior to the administration. In her video, McManus did not respond to his claims.

McManus noted that the “decision making bodies” of the union had been “vacated” by the administrator, adding that “this affected 11 people with full time jobs.” This was a cynical attempt to cover over what has already occurred. In reality, at least 270 CFMEU officials and organisers have been sacked in the space of a few weeks.

Having repeated all the assertions of the government and the employees and promoted their attack on construction workers, McManus declared that the ACTU would “oppose any attempts by employers or the Coalition to take advantage of this situation.” Construction workers are unlikely to place great confidence in that assurance.

In reality, the entire “situation” has been engineered to the “advantage” of the Labor government and the employers. Already, major building companies are flagging an overhaul of previously negotiated enterprise agreements. The *Australian Financial Review* has presented administration as an unprecedented opportunity. Under conditions of complaints that construction workers were receiving pay rises of between 5 and 6 percent, all future enterprise agreements for the next three years will be negotiated under the direction of the administrator, whose prerogative will clearly be to cut wages.

McManus’ video received an angry response on X/Twitter and other platforms. Many comments described the ACTU chief as a “scab,” a “union buster” and a shill for the employers. Those sentiments are entirely in accord with what has transpired.

The critical point, however, is not just McManus as an individual, but the role of the entire union bureaucracy, which she personifies as the head of the ACTU. The umbrella union body and all of its affiliates have been at the forefront of every major attack on the

working class over the past forty years.

In the 1980s, the ACTU partnered with big business and the Labor government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke in a series of tripartite Accords. Drafted by the union officialdom, they provided for the deregulation of the economy, the destruction of whole sections of industry and the decimation of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The ACTU facilitated deregistration of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in 1986 was a key component of this agenda, including the disciplining of militant workers and the abolition of organisations of struggle such as shop stewards committees. The BLF leaders accepted the deregistration and suppressed any struggle against it, paving the way for attacks on building workers and a vast increase in casualisation throughout the sector.

The only delegate to have opposed the Accords and their whole corporatist agenda at the ACTU's 1987 Congress was Mary Kerr, a member of the Socialist Labour League, the predecessor organisation of the Socialist Equality Party. For her principled stand, Kerr was removed from the event, despite her credentials as a delegate of the NSW Public Service Association, whose leadership assisted the expulsion.

In the 1990s, under the Keating Labor government, the ACTU helped to introduce enterprise bargaining, dividing workers workplace by workplace. That framework has been used ever since by the union bureaucracy to impose sell-out agreements cutting wages and slashing conditions and preventing any industry-wide struggle by workers.

In 2009, the ACTU and the unions partnered with the Rudd Labor government in introducing the Fair Work Australia industrial relations framework. The draconian regime consolidated earlier restrictions on workers' implemented by Hawke and Keating, outlawing virtually all industrial action, providing for the victimisation of militant workers and enabling a continuous onslaught on working conditions.

McManus' entire adult life has been associated with this rotten record. Beginning her climb up the rungs of the union bureaucracy at the age of 19, she participated in ACTU's Organising Works program, under then-ACTU secretary Bill Kelty, one of the architects of the Accords. McManus held various positions at the conservative Australian Services Union, before being given positions at the ACTU itself.

Her ascendancy to the role of secretary in 2016 was accompanied by a public relations exercise, aimed at presenting the lifelong bureaucrat who has never been involved in a workers' struggle as some sort of militant. McManus gave an interview in which she proclaimed her support for breaking "unjust laws."

Those remarks were hailed by the fake-left groups that seek to chain workers to the union bureaucracy. Socialist Alternative wrote: "Every militant in the union movement will welcome as a breath of fresh air Sally McManus's comments on defying unjust laws." Socialist Alliance presented McManus' ascendancy as "a strategic shift in the trade union movement in this country."

Ever since, McManus has enforced the Fair Work framework, while collaborating with the employers and governments.

Her role and that of the bureaucracy as a whole was epitomised in the first years of the pandemic. McManus and the ACTU partnered with the then Liberal-National Coalition government to impose wage freezes on millions of workers, and to suspend their basic conditions, including to such things as overtime pay. At the same time, McManus helped to craft the government's JobKeeper program, which provided businesses, mostly the major corporations, with some \$88.8 billion in government subsidies.

Conservative industrial relations minister Christian Porter described McManus as his new "BFF" (best friends forever). That was more than a passing comment. It encapsulated the fact that the union bureaucracy was the linchpin in defending not just the right-wing Coalition government, but capitalist rule amid the immense crisis in the initial phase of the pandemic. Amid fears in ruling circles that mass unemployment would trigger social upheaval, and industrial action by workers opposing their exposure to COVID, the ACTU did everything possible to enforce the dictates of the ruling class.

The result for workers of those policies and union-enforced attacks since has been a 4.8 percent reduction in real wages over the past four years, one of the biggest reversals in any advanced OECD country.

These policies are not the outcome simply of rotten individuals but of the social function of the trade union bureaucracy. It is a parasitic social layer whose executives, on hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, function as a police force of governments and the corporations.

For all of McManus' feigned shock and concern, corruption is the inevitable byproduct of this role. Every major ACTU affiliate has had credible accusations of corruption levelled against it over recent decades, invariably revolving around the sordid relations between the union officialdom and the employers, directed against workers.

The role of the unions is rooted in objective socio-economic processes. In an earlier period, the bureaucracy sought to defend its privileges and capitalism itself by pressuring nationally-based corporations and governments to provide limited concessions to workers. The globalisation of production obliterated the basis of that program. The unions became transformed into fully corporatised entities, seeking to ensure that their "own" national industry remained competitive in the international market through a continuous reduction in labour costs.

The CFMEU and its ousted leadership are no exception. Their sole preoccupation, throughout the administration, has been to maintain the positions and the privileges of the CFMEU officialdom.

The only way to fight administration and the broader onslaught on wages and conditions of which it is a part is through the establishment of genuine organisations of struggle, workers' rank-and-file committees independent of the entire bureaucracy. Such committees can break the isolation operations of the unions and coordinate a joint political and industrial fight across construction and more broadly.

This is a political struggle against the Labor government, the union bureaucracy and the entire political and corporate establishment. It poses the need for a new socialist perspective, which rejects the subordination of workers' rights and conditions and all of society to the profit dictates of the corporate elite.



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