

Manifesto of the Parliamentary Labor Party (1894)

To The Electors of New South Wales

The following is the manifesto issued by the Parliamentary Labor Party:—

In consequence of the decision of the Labor Party not to sign the so-called solidarity pledge adopted by the late Labor Conference, it is recognised that a position of grave responsibility has been assumed. This statement is therefore issued for the purpose of explaining the reasons which led to the decision and of pointing out some of the dangers which will accrue to the movement if the pledge is insisted on.

Blind Leaders

There is every reason to believe that this pledge has emanated in the first instance from men whose whole time is consumed in the theoretic fields of social economy, and who show no appreciation of the practical difficulties involved in the carrying out of their ideals. The utter impracticability of these gentlemen will, we are convinced, ultimately prove them to be the blindest guides of the labor movement. Some of the most astounding utterances are constantly falling from their lips; utterances which indicate all too surely how utterly deficient they are in political insight. As an instance of this we point to their statements (always made when the prohibitory nature of the pledge is pointed out to them) that it will be better to have a party of 10 working solidly together than a large number without the pledge. Knowing what we do of Parliament, we can only regard such utterances as being in the highest degree traitorous to the interests of labor. If only 10 labor members be returned to the next Parliament, we predict that amongst the first considerations of the new House will be the question of the establishment of five-year unpaid Parliaments, the disastrous results of which to labor need not be elaborated here. In view of contingencies such as these, those who are contemplating and trying to secure an issue of this kind should be regarded as the direct enemies of labor.

Parliamentary Puppets

Perhaps the gravest objection to this pledge is the fact that it utterly destroys the representative character of the member. It is entirely undemocratic. It is a complete abrogation of the electoral privileges of the constituencies, and seeks to vitiate the relationship which must always exist between the member and the electors. It absolutely prevents the making of any stipulation or compacts, which are the undoubted rights of the electors to demand before recording their votes. It seals the mouth of the candidate who has taken it. Outside the Labor Platform he cannot, if he be honest, promise the electors, or any section of them, either to support or oppose any measure which they may desire to gain or reject. The result will be the alienation of such a large body of voters as will preclude the possibility of the candidate's return.

The effect of this pledge has already been to drive from the leagues some of the staunchest members of the party, now called traitors, because they refuse to be slaves. It furnishes a ready weapon in the hands of those who openly declare that faithful service furnishes no claim for re-election. Such declarations mean that there shall be no reward for fidelity, intelligence, courage and perseverance; and on the other hand, no punishment for treachery, stupidity, cowardice and inertia. It will be signed readily by candidates whose sole object is to get into Parliament by means of the labor vote, but very reluctantly by the man who hesitates to promise something which might prove beyond his powers to perform. Its use, there, can hardly be to raise the standard of labor representation.

Self Seeking Tactics

It is difficult to resist the feeling that much of the confusion which has arisen is due to the distinctive personal animus by which the whole proceedings of the Central Committee has been characterized. It is almost the rule when speaking of the sitting labor members to

disparage their ability, and to suggest invidious comparisons between their capabilities and those of prospective candidates—always, of course, in favor of the latter. And in feeble justification of their 'poor efforts' in Parliament it has been stated that they were selected haphazard at the last election, and that with the advent of members of higher calibre the cause of labor would make greater progress. Not a single indication of favor or approval of anything done by the labor members has ever emanated from this Executive. The only responses made to the many bold and determined efforts of the Labor Party have been envious declarations of their incapacity.

In view of all that has been stated it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that it has been persistently attempted to undermine the position of some of the present members in order to secure the election in their stead of some of the more prominent members of the Central Committee. With such tactics so obviously apparent, it can be small matter for surprise that a firm stand is made against them by members who are confident of their integrity, and can point to an unbroken record of faithfulness to the Labor movement.

Our Position

The folly of an arbitrary insistence of the pledge becomes plainer when the possibilities to labor of the next election are taken into view. A more favorable opportunity has never present itself to the labor movement of Australia than will be furnished by the next appeal to the constituencies. With a prudent selection of candidates pledged to the sufficiently clear declaration of political principles embodied in the labor platform; with some liberty of action allowed them to enter into such compacts with their constituents, as shall not be incompatible with the labor programme; and with such freedom allowed to the party in Parliament as will enable them to shape their course, in view of the political necessities of the moment, the result must be a large increase of the number of Labor members. This being the case, the responsibility of failure will rest with those who so eagerly impose such conditions upon labor candidates as will prove an impassable bar at the entrance to the legislature of the country.

Appeal to the People

THE PARTY HAS THEREFORE DECIDED TO SUBMIT THE ISSUE AS BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND THE UNREPRESENTATIVE, PROXY-PACKED, AND LARGELY SELF-SELECTED CONFERENCE TO THE DEMOCRATIC VOTERS OF THE COUNTRY. WITH THE OBJECT OF FURTHER EXPLAINING THE ATTITUDE OF THE PARTY ON THE GRAVE ISSUED INVOLVED, IT IS INTENDED TO HOLD MEETINGS IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE COLONY AS OPPORTUNITY OFFERS.

Joseph Cook
Legislative Assembly, April 18, 1891

Fisher papers, National Library, Canberra. Reprinted in David Lovell, *Marxism and Australian Socialism before the Bolshevik Revolution*, pp.273-274