

# The International Socialist Organisation and the jailing of Pauline Hanson

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The recent jailing in Australia of two right wing political figures has provoked a highly revealing reaction from a middle class protest group, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO).

Pauline Hanson and David Ettridge, leaders of the racist One Nation party, were imprisoned last month for three years on trumped up charges of electoral fraud. Anti-democratic electoral legislation, which requires minor parties to lodge the names of hundreds of members in order to obtain registration, was utilised by leading government figures in collaboration with business and Labor party identities, as a means of removing from the political scene a party they had come to regard as a threat to parliamentary stability. The convictions and sentence, as the WSWS pointed out last week, establish a dangerous precedent for the victimisation of any organisation that wins popular support against the official political establishment.

According to a raft of opinion polls, the majority of ordinary people have been deeply opposed to the jailings. A Morgan national poll on August 28 found just 13 percent in support. Some 63 percent expressed disapproval of the slush fund set up by the Howard government's Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott to fund the legal attack while 45 percent thought Prime Minister Howard should sack Abbott for his involvement.

Newspapers, radio stations and politicians have been flooded with angry denunciations of the verdict as an attack on freedom of speech and the right to challenge the major parties from supporters and opponents of Hanson alike.

Notwithstanding its obvious implications for democratic rights, however, the decision by Brisbane District Court Chief Judge Patsy Wolfe to imprison the pair for three years has been enthusiastically welcomed by the ISO. The August 29 edition of its newspaper *Socialist Worker* features, under a photograph of Hanson, the banner headline "This racist deserves jail".

The first and most obvious thing to be said about this is that Hanson was not jailed for being a racist. She was put away as the result of a five-year conspiracy organised by a

leading representative of the Howard government—a government that has implemented nearly all of Hanson's policies, above all those that attack the rights of refugees, immigrants and Australia's Aboriginal population.

If she had been jailed for her racist political views, that in itself would have constituted a major assault on the right to freedom of speech. Jailing people for reactionary right wing views is only the precursor to jailing others for their socialist convictions. Moreover, the position of the socialist movement has always been that the task of defeating racist and reactionary views and defending democratic rights is a *political* one that must be prosecuted by the working class itself. It cannot be ceded to the courts or the police—i.e., to the capitalist state.

How then to explain the ISO's extraordinarily short-sighted position? What is its political significance?

At the most immediate level, the ISO leadership clearly hopes that by posturing as virulent "anti-racists" and "anti-Hansonites" it will build support among confused and politically inexperienced young people. No doubt there are some who have spontaneously responded to news of Hanson's jailing with relief and even glee. "Hooray! She's gone! She should have gotten life!"

But such a view, while understandable as an instinctive reaction, is profoundly misguided from the standpoint of political principle and the long-term interests of ordinary working people. And it is by no means coincidental that dovetails exactly with the outlook of leading representatives of the Howard government, including Abbott and Treasurer Peter Costello.

The ISO's thinking is set out in its August 29 front-page article "No tears for Hanson" and its editorial of the same date: "Confront these racist criminals".

**Argument No 1: "Hanson broke the rules for party registration in both the structure of the party and the submission of a membership list." She and Ettridge "lied to obtain registration for the 1998 Queensland election. This lie allowed One Nation to win 11 seats and claim \$500,000 in electoral funding."**

With this argument, the ISO adapts itself completely and uncritically to the anti-democratic electoral laws under which Hanson was charged. They were introduced in the 1990s in order to create prohibitive barriers to minor parties standing candidates in elections under the party name. Their purpose was to bolster the two-party system under conditions of widespread disgust and alienation from the entire official setup.

Nowhere does the ISO voice the slightest objection to the new laws. But it is a fundamental democratic principle that anyone should have the unimpeded right to stand for election, and any political party, no matter how many members it has, should have the right to stand under its own name. And not only that: the rights of voters are also at stake. They should have the right to know the political affiliation of the candidates who are standing.

It is also a fundamental principle that internal party affairs, including a party's organisational structure, are matters for that party's members, not the capitalist state.

In any event, the Queensland electoral commissioner accepted the party's application for registration in December 1997. There is no question but that the 1,000 people whose names were submitted by One Nation's leaders regarded themselves as members, indicating a significant level of support for the organisation. It was not until after the June 1998 elections, when Hanson's party shocked the establishment by winning 11 seats that a challenge was mounted to its registration. Because the penalty provisions of the Queensland Electoral Act had already expired, charges were laid against Hanson and Ettridge under the state's criminal code. In other words, criminal laws were used to prosecute and convict the pair for a technical breach of electoral laws that were themselves fundamentally anti-democratic.

One Nation won 11 seats because of the hostility of ordinary people to the two major parties—Labor and Liberal/National—not because she “lied” about her party's structure. Hanson made populist appeals to this mass disaffection and, with the assistance of the media and the Howard government itself, sought to divert it into reactionary channels.

**Argument No 2: Hanson “prepared the ground for John Howard and [Immigration Minister] Philip Ruddock's vicious persecution of asylum seekers...”**

This stands reality on its head. In fact, the ground for Hanson was prepared by 13 years of Labor government, under which job security, living standards and basic democratic rights for ordinary people came under sustained attack. It was Labor that first sought to channel the mounting social distress and political resentments into refugee scapegoating. The mandatory detention of asylum seekers,

along with police raids to identify “illegal” immigrants and mass deportations were all introduced by the federal Labor government in the early 1990s.

Howard and Ruddock initially promoted both Hanson and her views in order to shift the political climate further to the right. They then sought to win back her social base—most of them previous Coalition voters—by implementing her policies. Since neither the government nor the Labor opposition could or would fight her politically, they resorted to other methods—dirty tricks, slush funds, police raids and the courts—to get rid of her.

**Argument No 3: “If Hanson's appeal is successful or her sentence reduced, it will legitimise undemocratic practices and give a green light to racism.”**

Again, the opposite is the case. If Hanson's jailing is allowed to stand, it will legitimise witchhunts against minor parties and their leaderships on any number of spurious technical grounds.

The ISO makes no mention of the five-year-long campaign to destroy Hanson and One Nation and the identity and political agenda of its instigators. Likewise, it omits any reference to Abbott's slush fund or who the donors were.

The reason is that any objective review of the background to Hanson's jailing would reveal the profound political issues at stake and the serious tasks confronting the working class as a whole. But that conflicts with the ISO's immediate political goals—to claim her imprisonment as a “victory” for anti-Hanson protesters and provide the basis for the launching of future protest stunts. In this way, the ISO seeks to convince young people that nothing more than the shouting of anti-racist slogans at a few demonstrations will succeed in combating racism and the political system that gives rise to it.

In the process, the ISO leadership is lining up with a serious and unprecedented assault on democratic rights that could—sooner rather than later—be used to frame-up and victimise political organisations of the left, including its own.



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