

Australian Greens election campaign: silence on the Iraq war and a grubby deal with Labor

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Popular anger and frustration over the big business policies of the Iemma Labor government in New South Wales (NSW) and the opposition Liberal-National Party coalition, along with concerns about climate change and mass opposition to Australian participation in the US-led occupation of Iraq, is expected to generate increased votes for the Greens in the March 24 state ballot.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has made clear in its election program and in statements and speeches by candidates throughout the NSW campaign, the Greens represent no alternative for working people. The organisation defends the profit system, the underlying source of all the problems that confront masses of ordinary people today. Its essential purpose, the SEP has consistently warned, is to ensure that the deep-seated hostility to Labor and the coalition parties remains trapped within the national framework and the parliamentary setup.

This has been starkly demonstrated in the Greens' election campaign, whose principal feature is its deafening silence over the war in Iraq.

While the overwhelming majority of Australians and millions of people around the world are deeply opposed to the criminal war on Iraq, the Greens have refused to even mention the issue in the state election. It is not raised anywhere in the Greens' election program, its campaign advertisements or the 40 most recent press releases on its campaign site.

This is a remarkable and revealing omission by a party that has made a conscious decision to appeal to antiwar sentiment and whose leaders were keynote speakers at the mass demonstrations prior to the US-led invasion in 2003. In the 2004 federal election the Greens called for the withdrawal of Australian troops.

The Greens' silence makes clear this is not a genuine antiwar party in any sense of the word. Like that of its counterparts around the world, the Greens' opposition is of a tactical nature and determined entirely by national interests.

In 1998, the German Greens, ruling in alliance with the Social Democratic Party, championed the mobilisation of German troops to the Balkans and then in 2001, supported the deployment of troops to Afghanistan in 2001. Likewise, the Australian Greens agitated for the mobilisation of Australian troops to East Timor in 1999. Both argued that these interventions were for the national good.

The Greens led demonstrations urging the Howard government to dispatch troops to stop attacks on the East Timorese people by

Indonesian-backed militia, citing humanitarian concerns. The intervention's real purpose, however, was to ensure that Portugal and other rivals of the Australian ruling elite were prevented from gaining control of the resource-rich and strategically significant area.

In the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, the Greens' "antiwar" stance was predicated on the position that Australian troops should be used closer to home—in East Timor and the South Pacific. The best interests of Australian capital, the Greens argued, would be served by deploying troops to defend "our backyard".

Last year the Greens backed the Howard government's destabilisation campaign against former East Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and the dispatch of troops to ensure Australian businesses secured the lion's share of East Timor's oil and gas resources. The organisation has also consistently supported Australian bullying in the Solomon Islands and other south Pacific countries.

Another key element of the Greens' program is its support for the so-called "war on terror," the catch-all pretext invented by the Bush administration to justify its imperialist interventions. The Greens have never seriously challenged the bogus war and the draconian anti-democratic measures that have been legislated in its name.

Along with its Labor counterparts in the state and federal parliaments, the Greens assisted the Howard government to introduce over 40 anti-terror laws reversing long-standing democratic and legal rights. Any occasional criticism by the Greens of these measures has been for purely tactical reasons, with the organisation suggesting minor amendments and offering advice on how best to implement the new laws.

This was clearly demonstrated when the SEP's candidate for Marrickville, Patrick O'Connor, asked federal Greens leader Bob Brown at a local public meeting on March 11, why his party had endorsed a key anti-terror law in late 2005.

Using the scare-mongering techniques employed by the Bush administration and the Howard government, Brown replied that the world was a "dangerous place" where "uranium and new technologies can get into the wrong hands..."

"We stand for security for our communities and we make no apology for that," Brown declared.

In reality, the anti-terror laws, as growing layers of the population are beginning to recognise, have nothing to do with protecting ordinary people or preventing terrorist attacks. They are

designed to give the government the power to intimidate and suppress anti-government opposition on a range of issues, along with all forms of political dissent.

Another damning exposure of the Greens in the NSW election campaign is its grubby electoral pact with Labor, announced on March 9. The unprincipled arrangement has stunned many Greens supporters.

Under the deal, the NSW Greens have directed “preferences” to Labor in 24 key marginal Legislative Assembly (lower house) seats, a decision that will probably help reelect the widely despised state government. In return, Labor will direct its preferences to Greens in the NSW upper house and has agreed to establish a “preferencing framework” between the two organisations for the forthcoming federal election.

Preferential voting is compulsory in most Australian elections—i.e., a vote is not valid unless the elector places numbers, in order of preference, beside all candidates on the ballot paper contesting the parliamentary seat. In NSW, voting is “optional preferential” in the lower house, with voters only obliged to put a number 1 against the candidate of their choice. This means voters are not forced to direct “preferences” to any other candidate or party.

In the upper house, electors can vote for just one “Group” (political party), but their preferences will be allocated according to arrangements made by the “Group” prior to polling day. (The only party that has not allocated preferences, and which has made no deal with any other party or candidate in the NSW election, is the Socialist Equality Party. That is why the SEP’s Legislative Council candidates appear below the line in Group D on the ballot paper.)

Calculating that the voting deal with Labor would provide electoral gains for the organisation, the Greens justified it on the grounds that Labor represented a “lesser evil” than the Liberals. The state government, it argues, provides a buffer against the federal coalition’s WorkChoices attacks on jobs and working conditions and the state Liberal opposition’s threats to slash 20,000 public sector jobs.

Labor is not a “lesser evil,” as millions of ordinary working people are beginning to understand. The function served by the Greens’ lie is to cover up Labor’s record in NSW and federally, and to sow illusions in this deeply reactionary party.

The NSW Labor government has never fought the Howard government’s WorkChoices legislation. Instead, it has worked in alliance with the union leadership to prevent any genuine mobilisation of workers against the draconian laws. Nor will it defend public sector jobs. If elected, Iemma plans to slash 5,000 public sector jobs, on top the thousands already axed in vital social services during the past 12 years of Labor government.

While the Labor Party was established by the unions in the late nineteenth century, and represented an important political advance for working people, it has always defended the profit system. Any social gains won by the working class have required a political struggle against the Labor bureaucracy.

Even then, there is a world of difference between the organisation that emerged in the 1890s and today’s Labor Party, which is a thoroughly right-wing institution, bereft of support and

members, and kept alive by corporate donations and taxpayer-funded electoral financing.

This became apparent to masses of workers during the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983-96. Working in alliance with the union bureaucracy, the Laborites carried out the greatest transfer of wealth to the rich in Australian history, unleashing major attacks on the jobs and living standards of working people.

It was during this time—as popular hostility mounted against Labor—that the Australian Greens began to win support and expand its electoral base.

Labor’s attacks, in turn, opened the way for the landslide victory of the Howard government in 1996. Since then Howard has worked in alliance with state and territory Labor governments to continue the assaults begun by Hawke and Keating.

Two weeks before this month’s Greens-Labor deal, senior Labor officials publicly admitted that their NSW branch was “highly vulnerable” and predicted double-digit swings against the Iemma government in several working class electorates. Accordingly, NSW Labor strategists developed an election campaign that denied any connection whatsoever between current premier Morris Iemma and the preceding Carr Labor government.

This is the context in which the Greens have offered their political services. Right at the point when masses of people have become deeply hostile to Labor and are looking for a genuine alternative, the Greens have entered the fray to breathe life back into the decaying corpse.

The Greens’ preference deal with Labor also helps clarify why it has been silent on the Iraq war. Any demand for a full troop withdrawal, or exposure of the carnage resulting from four years of slaughter, would severely embarrass the Labor Party which has, after all, supported the war from the outset, expressing only minor tactical differences with Bush and Howard.

All those seeking a genuine political alternative to Labor should study the policies advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, vote for our candidates in the March 24 ballot and apply to join the party.



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