

“GetUp! Action for Australia”: Protest politics in support of Labor

Laura Tiernan

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GetUp! the online protest group modelled on MoveOn.org in the United States, has been accorded substantial media attention during the 2007 election campaign. In recent days press reports have focussed on GetUp!’s efforts at mobilising thousands of volunteers for polling booths on Saturday, calling for a “vote for change”.

A feature article in the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* November 17-18 edition described GetUp! as “Australia’s fastest growing activist organisation”. With more than 200,000 members, wrote the *Herald’s* Caroline Baum, GetUp! had “managed to put social justice back on the agenda, and made it cool to care”.

GetUp! describes itself as an “independent grassroots advocacy organisation” that “does not back any particular party”. According to Baum it differs “in significant ways” from its US-equivalent MoveOn.org—which openly backs the Democratic Party—“primarily in being apolitical”.

But GetUp! is neither “apolitical” nor “independent”. It functions as a political prop for Labor and the parliamentary two-party system, blocking any genuinely independent movement of working people and youth against war, social inequality and the growing assault on basic democratic rights.

In the context of this year’s Australian election campaign, GetUp!’s role has been to try and corral popular anger against the Howard government behind Labor as a ‘lesser evil’. Its entire campaign is nothing short of a godsend for Labor.

GetUp!’s core pitch, made in multiple television and online advertisements, is a plea to “Save our Senate”. A television commercial produced by GetUp! features Labor’s Kate Lundy, the Greens’ Bob Brown and the Democrats’ Lyn Allison, unabashedly urging a vote for all three parties in the upper house.

At the same time, GetUp! is targeting key marginal seats held by Liberal MPs, including the prime minister’s Bennelong electorate, and environment minister Malcolm Turnbull’s seat of Wentworth. The organisation’s director Brett Solomon revealed GetUp! volunteers will cover all booths in the two electorates on polling day, with voters provided fortune cookie messages such as “The stars say job security will be important to your children. Your vote today can end WorkChoices [the Howard government’s widely hated new industrial relations legislation].”

While GetUp! stops short of formally endorsing the ALP, the thrust of its election campaign is that a vote for the opposition parties on November 24—read Rudd Labor—would represent a massive victory for democracy.

This is a political deception of immense proportions. Rudd Labor has positioned itself *well to the right* of the Howard government and, under the banner of “economic conservatism”, has pledged to implement a new round of “micro-economic reform” gutting welfare and public spending and slashing public service jobs, while boosting the military and coercive powers of the state. GetUp!’s backing for Labor—defacto or otherwise—means it will bear direct political responsibility for the savage anti-working class policies that Rudd Labor will carry out.

Since GetUp!’s creation in 2005 was modelled closely on America’s MoveOn.org, the politics and evolution of MoveOn is instructive. It was formed in 1998 by Democratic Party members—IT entrepreneurs Joan Blades and Wes Boyd—to oppose right-wing orchestrated impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair. Known initially as “Censure and Move On”, the site demanded that “Congress must immediately censure president Clinton and Move On to pressing issues facing the country”. The political upheavals that gripped the United States immediately after the impeachment—the stolen election of 2000, 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the assault on democratic rights ushered in by “the war on terror”—saw MoveOn’s emergence as a significant political force.

MoveOn has functioned shamelessly as a defender of the Democratic Party. During the 2000 presidential election, it rounded on Greens candidate Ralph Nader, attacking him as a “spoiler” and warning its substantial membership base against a “kamikaze vote” that would detract from the Democrats’ chances. In the lead-up to the 2004 presidential race, MoveOn was instrumental in gathering backing for leading Democrat contender Howard Dean, whose public attacks on the Iraq war drew support from large numbers of college students in particular. But as the political establishment—led by the Democratic Party itself—turned against Dean, aiming to eliminate the issue of Iraq from the presidential campaign, MoveOn rapidly accommodated itself to the shift, throwing its weight behind pro-war candidate John Kerry.

This year, following the victory of the Democratic Party in last November’s mid-term congressional elections, MoveOn has come out openly in support of Democratic Party-sponsored war-funding bills, which have financed a major escalation in the criminal US-led assault on Iraq. Moreover, the organisation has publicly attacked the decision of prominent antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan to contest next year’s election against Democratic congressional leader Nancy Pelosi.

MoveOn’s slavish support for the Democratic Party has severely compromised its “left” credentials. Perhaps this is why GetUp! has decided to be somewhat more circumspect in relation to Labor. It does not call directly for a Labor vote. But its founders have worked closely with MoveOn.org and share the same basic political orientation. One thing is certain: as opposition to Rudd Labor develops in the aftermath of November 24, GetUp! will vehemently oppose any challenge by working people to the existing political setup.

GetUp! was launched in August 2005, after the Coalition parties took control of the Senate—the outcome of the 2004 elections held nine months earlier. It tapped an emerging mood for change among ordinary people. For many, the November 2004 federal election was a jolting experience. Howard’s re-election and Labor’s inability to mount any principled opposition to the Coalition, led to a search by growing numbers of workers, youth and professionals for an alternative to the major parties.

While Howard’s position was strong in electoral terms, with the Coalition now controlling both houses of parliament, there were clear

signs of a mounting government crisis. In February 2005, the Cornelia Rau scandal broke, followed by the case of Australian citizen Vivian Alvarez, who was mistakenly deported, wheelchair-bound, to the Philippines. The ensuing weeks and months saw public opposition snowball against the regime of mandatory asylum-seeker detention, with calls for the release of incarcerated refugee children. An *Age* poll published in May showed a staggering 94 percent support for a Royal Commission into the Howard government's immigration policies.

In July, the first mass protests erupted against the government's impending industrial relations laws. Some 250,000 marched, followed by half a million in November. Protests and blockades by truck drivers against rising petrol prices also flared up, symptomatic of broader social discontent over falling living standards.

Throughout, Howard maintained his government's unflinching commitment to the Iraq war, in clear defiance of public sentiment. In mid-2005, the prime minister's attempt to seize on terrorist attacks in London and Bali by ramming through sweeping anti-terror laws drew public disquiet, as well as condemnation from prominent legal figures. Faced with an escalating crisis of authority, the Howard government responded in its tried and tested fashion, resorting to racial politics and stoking fears—this time over Muslim 'integration'. December's Cronulla race riots, fomented by forces close to the Howard leadership—including radio shock-jock Alan Jones—were an attempt to drown out mounting public anger and shift the political atmosphere decisively to the right.

Opposition to the Howard government was developing, however, from two distinctly different quarters. Alongside a nascent movement from below was a shift by sections of the ruling elite against Howard, in favour of a recasting of Australia's international image abroad and the reduction of escalating class tensions at home. The launch of GetUp! in August 2005 was part of this latter process.

One of the most interesting pages on GetUp!'s web site can be found in the PDF-version of the group's annual report for 2005-2006. This lists GetUp!'s board of directors, along with organizations and individuals who have provided support. The list confirms that GetUp!, far from being a "grassroots" movement, is the offspring of sections of the corporate and political establishment. Its list of directors includes GetUp! founders David Madden and Jeremy Heimans. Madden, a former Australian Army officer has acted as a consultant to the World Bank and United Nations. Heimans previously worked for the strategic consulting firm McKinsey & Company and has consulted for the UN, OECD and ILO. Among GetUp!'s other directors is Don Mercer, chairman of Newcrest Mining and Orica Ltd (one of Australia's largest publicly-listed companies). Until recently AWU national secretary Bill Shorten was on GetUp!'s Board (he has since resigned to pursue a career in the parliamentary Labor Party), along with Evan Thorley, National Secretary of the Australian Fabian Society and former CEO of LookSmart, an online advertising and technology company.

Among the list of individuals thanked by GetUp! for their support is former Liberal Party and Sydney Stock Exchange president John Valder and former Liberal leader John Hewson, author of the infamous 1991 FightBack! plan that advocated radical labor market deregulation and a Goods and Services Tax. They believe Howard's unflinching support for US policy in Iraq, his divisive policies on indigenous Australians and refugees, his defence of the monarchy and his politicisation of the public service are damaging the long term national interests of Australian capitalism.

Valder is a scion of the Liberal establishment. During the mid-1980s he was instrumental in Howard's elevation to the party leadership against Liberal "wet" Andrew Peacock. Two decades later, during the 2004 federal election, Valder was running a campaign in Bennelong under the slogan "Not Happy, John". His intervention won support in many quarters, including from Tory socialites who feared that Howard's

policies were threatening to "tear apart the social fabric". As Peter Shenstone a former market research director and architect of Labor's 1972 "It's Time" campaign noted: "the interesting thing with the campaign slogan that we're using now, Not Happy John, is that it's another one of those phrases that allows people to project onto it whatever it is they're not happy with."

While GetUp! boasts more than 200,000 members, its activities are based on the lowest common denominator: "Whether it is signing a petition, engaging with the media, attending an event or helping to get a television ad on the air, you'll only ever be asked to take targeted, coordinated and strategic action. Taking action is optional, convenient and proven to work!" its web site declares.

Its campaign material calls for "a parliament with economic fairness, social justice and the environment at its core". GetUp!'s logo depicts a computer mouse with its wires plugging into Canberra's federal parliament building, whose apex is formed by an Australian flag. At a time of mounting disaffection toward the entire official parliamentary framework the message is loud and clear: "the people" can have input and control over the decisions made by parliament.

Part of GetUp!'s superficial appeal is its claim that "targeted" action on "a case-by-case" basis can deliver "practical results". Its web site claims "key political victories" in which GetUp! has "influence[d] political outcomes". These include "stopping changes to our migration laws that would have seen asylum seekers, including children, processed and detained offshore" and the bringing home of Guantánamo Bay prisoner David Hicks. The purpose of these claims is to sow illusions in the viability of protest politics and to obscure the far-reaching character of the assault being waged against the living conditions and democratic rights of ordinary working people.

Closer examination reveals that GetUp!'s "victories" were all part of an attempt by the major parties to head off an independent movement from below. The Howard government's "backdown" on the offshore detention of asylum seekers is a case in point. It followed an earlier reversal by Howard on mandatory detention of refugee children, with the insertion of a new clause into the Migration Act that "a minor shall only be detained as a matter of last resort". This amendment, preceding GetUp!'s founding by some two months, was a response to threats by Liberal "rebels", including Petro Georgio and Judi Moylan, who were becoming increasingly concerned at the damage being done to Australia's international reputation. Like the Howard government's subsequent retreat on offshore detention, the amendments to child detention were aimed, above all, at preserving the principle of mandatory incarceration intact.

GetUp!'s claims concerning the release of David Hicks are just as revealing. It is true that "The Government changed its policy on Hicks as the community demanded action." But GetUp!'s account conceals the thoroughly anti-democratic manner in which the Hicks case was "settled"—via a deal between Howard and Cheney which saw Hicks jailed in South Australia's Yatala prison under a gag order designed to ensure his silence throughout this year's federal election.

GetUp!'s claims about the "victory" of "community action" obscure the enormous dangers confronting working people as a result of their continued subordination to the two-party, parliamentary framework. All over the world, the working class confronts spiralling militarism and war, the overturn of centuries-old democratic rights and legal protections, and a global economic and financial system that is plunging millions into ever-greater insecurity and outright devastation. GetUp!'s essential function is to prevent, at all costs, a revolutionary settling of accounts.

Whichever government wins office in Saturday's election, major class battles are on the agenda. For these, workers and young people need to construct an international socialist movement, based on a program and principles that have been tested during the course of the twentieth

century—a movement that is genuinely independent of, and stands in irreconcilable opposition to, the organizations and parties of the political establishment, including Labor, the Greens and all of their defenders. That movement is the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its Australian section, the Socialist Equality Party.

Authorised by N. Beams, 100B Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, NSW

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