Australia's political coup and the role of the ex-left

Laura Tiernan, Nick Beams
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The response of the middle-class pseudo-left groups to the coup which removed Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and installed Julia Gillard has highlighted the class interests they serve.

Whatever their differences, the common basis of these groups—Socialist Alternative, Socialist Alliance, Solidarity and the Socialist Party—is their organic hostility to the political independence of the working class. All of them seek to subordinate the working class to the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy and thereby to the capitalist state itself. That is why they have worked to cover up the political significance of the coup and its implications for the working class.

In the lead-up to the coup, some of the world's most powerful corporate interests, in particular the giant transnational mining companies BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Xstrata, waged a campaign of destabilisation against the government. The Minerals Council of Australia launched a multi-million dollar media blitz with 1,300 television advertisements warning that the Rudd government's planned Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT) threatened jobs, retirees' superannuation funds and Australia's economic future. The scare campaign gained traction as business opposition to the RSPT grew and the Murdoch press issued increasingly strident threats to Rudd's leadership.

Nothing like this business-led and media campaign had been seen since the months before the ousting of the Whitlam Labor government in the Canberra Coup of November 11, 1975. But, as far as the pseudo left was concerned, the surgical strike against Rudd by a cabal of well-connected Labor operatives, behind the back of the parliamentary party, not to speak of the public at large, was nothing to get too concerned about.

Socialist Alternative's first piece on the coup was entitled "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss", while Solidarity declared "Gillard takes Labor's reins: but it's the same horse, different Jockey."

Socialist Alliance did not respond with a statement. Instead, it issued a series of comments from various supporters that sought to minimise the significance of the coup, while promoting illusions in the possibility of pressuring Gillard.

According to Socialist Alliance member Tim Gooden, secretary of the Geelong Trades Hall Council: "The new leadership of the Labor government has an opportunity now to introduce a real response to climate change, to undo the damage done to refugees by the Howard government and under Rudd, and to resolve the outstanding issues with the trade union movement, including abolishing the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC)."

Leading Socialist Alliance member Alex Bainbridge said that while Rudd had been elected under the banner of "change" and "new leadership" he did not "deliver anything like the progressive changes that we need. Gillard has now become prime minister precisely because people are still hungering for real change and genuine progressive leadership."

The absurd proposition that Rudd had been removed because of a movement from below was echoed by Stuart Munckton, co-editor of *Green Left Weekly*, who warned that "if Gillard takes the same route [as Rudd] and fails to implement the change people desperately want, especially in tackling climate change, she will go the same way as Rudd. You can only bullshit people for so long."

Long-time Socialist Alliance member Pip Hinman described the coup as a "desperate attempt to rebadge the Labor Party" and a "shuffling of the deck chairs."

Ewan Saunders, Socialist Alliance candidate for the federal seat of Brisbane, pointed to the key role of the multinational mining companies in the ousting of Rudd, but then called for the very trade union and Labor leaders who had carried out their dictates to mount a campaign against them: "Now is the time for the trade union movement to say enough is enough. We must demand that Gillard and the ALP stand up to the mining giants and refuse to back down on the government's proposed tax on mining super-profits."

Two weeks after the coup Bainbridge wrote that the "dumping of Rudd was more about an image change than a policy change for the ALP government." In other words, the coup was little more than a public relations exercise.

A common feature of all the commentary by the pseudo-left groups was the assertion that the removal of Rudd would boost Labor's chances in the federal election. For them, this was the primary question.

An article in *Green Left Weekly*, published on July 4 declared: "Many people will be breathing a sigh of relief that the worrying prospect of a Tony Abbott Liberal government seems less likely than it did before."

Socialist Alternative leader Mick Armstrong sought to dress his positions up with a certain "left" phraseology. In an article published on June 29, he denounced Gillard's record, especially on immigration and refugees, insisting that "in no sense does Gillard represent a political advance on Rudd" and that "she was centrally involved in drawing up and implementing all this government's reactionary policies."

However, in the end, the deciding factor for Armstrong was the electoral situation.

After noting that Gillard could be relied on to "unleash her bile on workers", whether teachers or building workers, he concluded: "Nonetheless, at least in the short term, Gillard is likely to revive the confidence of disillusioned Labor supporters and be more capable of standing up to Abbott. Millions of people had seemingly stopped listening to Rudd. He could not sell the simplest of measures, such as a tax on the filthy rich mine owners."

All these organisations argue that the election of a Labor government represents an advance, either because Labor is subject to greater pressure from below or because it constitutes a "lesser evil" as compared to the Liberals. Hence, while they may issue various protests and denunciations against the Labor Party from time to time, they insist that the working class must remain within its orbit.

More than 150 years ago, in an analysis that has lost none of its acuity, Marx summed up this type of politics as follows: "Far from desiring to revolutionise all society for the revolutionary proletarians, the democratic

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petty bourgeois strive for a change in social conditions by means of which existing society will be made as tolerable and comfortable as possible for them."

For the working class, the most decisive question is not whether a Liberal or Labor government is returned at the ballot box, but the development of its own independent political movement.

As a review of the critical experiences of the past 30 years demonstrates, the smashing up of the organised labour movement, and the sidelining of the working class as a political force, was carried out not by the Liberals but by Labor governments in collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, with a crucial role played by the "lefts".

The return of the working class as an independent social and political force cannot take place through the very organisations responsible for its suppression—the Labor Party and the trade union apparatus. It can only develop as a result of a decisive and deep-going political struggle against them.

Whatever their tactical differences, the pseudo-left tendencies are united in their hostility to such a perspective. And this is not just a question of their political outlook. Their hostility to the political independence of the working class has deep material roots. Key elements of these groups have integrated themselves into the various union apparatuses, while all of them have established close working relations with sections of the Labor Party and the Greens. Their support for Labor is not, as they try to present it, a means of advancing the interests of the working class, but the life-style choice of a narrow stratum of the petty bourgeoisie, for whom Labor governments provide certain material benefits and advantages.

With their continued insistence that Labor constitutes a "lesser evil" , the middle class groups play an important role as political adjuncts to the corporate and financial elites.

In 2007, the Rudd-led Labor Party, supported by all the pseudo lefts, was returned to office with the backing of key sections of the ruling class. In 2008-2009, these circles widely supported Rudd's fiscal stimulus measures and bank guarantees, with Murdoch's newspaper the *Australian* even naming Rudd "Australian of the Year" for 2009 because of his handling of the impact of the global financial crisis.

But as the international bourgeoisie began to shift its orientation from fiscal stimulus to austerity measures aimed at attacking the working class, key sections of the ruling class turned against Rudd.

In an editorial published on June 26, the *Australian* declared baldly that "this was a coup we had to have." It was necessary to remove Rudd in order to install an "effective politician to the prime ministership."

Significantly, there was no campaign in the *Australian* or any other section of the corporate mass media for the ousting of the Labor government. This was a surgical strike within the Labor Party to change its leadership, under conditions where the most powerful sections of the ruling elite regard Labor, not the Liberal Party, as the best instrument for imposing the demands of the international financial markets onto the backs of the working class.

Indeed, setting out the line followed by all the "left" groups, the *Australian* editorial declared: "The leadership switch from Kevin Rudd to Julia Gillard was a change for the better, one intended to help Labor avoid what was shaping as an extraordinary electoral defeat after just one term."

According to the *Australian*, the coup was driven by overwhelming fears in the Labor caucus over the party's poor polling in marginal seats. All the "left" groups sang from the same song sheet. According to Socialist Alliance, Rudd's nosedive in the polls led to Labor's desperate attempt to "re-brand" itself. Solidarity declared that: "For Labor's poll driven number crunchers, Rudd's massive dive in the opinion polls sealed his fate." According to the Socialist Party: "After a period of sinking popularity and public discontent, Rudd became the first Labor prime minister ousted before completing a first term."

And when the opinion polls began to rise, Socialist Alternative was there as cheer leader for the new regime, declaring that "the sacking of Kevin Rudd as party leader seems at least in the short term to have been a definite success. The initial opinion polls with Julia Gillard as leader have seen the Labor vote surge."

Like the bourgeois mass media, the pseudo-left groups placed their focus on the highly dubious opinion polls in order to try to cover up the anti-democratic character of the coup and the dangers it posed for the working class.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, in opposition to these attempts to chloroform the working class, sought to clarify the class significance of what had taken place. An article published on June 24, the day Gillard was installed as prime minister, explained that the coup was a "graphic exposure of the thoroughly worm-eaten character of both the Labor Party and the entire system of so-called parliamentary democracy in Australia."

A statement published by the SEP on June 28 declared that Gillard's installation by a coup initiated by a handful of unknown factional warlords and trade union bureaucrats was a "warning to the working class" and pointed to the "increasingly anti-democratic measures that are now being developed."

In a report to an SEP conference on July 4, the party's national secretary Nick Beams drew out the implications of the coup: "The ousting of Rudd has sparked considerable concern among wide layers of people because they sense, correctly, that it has pointed to some deeply disturbing realities: that elections, the paraphernalia of parliamentary democracy, voting and so on, really count for nothing and that behind the façade of parliamentary democracy political outcomes are controlled and manipulated by a handful of people. There was, in these events, a whiff of dictatorship. If Rudd could so easily be deposed by a Labor Party cabal operating at the behest of giant corporate, media and financial interests without a word of opposition from within the Labor Party, including from Rudd himself, then what else could happen? If, for example, it was decided that parliament itself should be suspended in the national interest, then would the Labor MPs and leaders be any less compliant? The events of the past three weeks are a graphic reminder of the Marxist theory of the state, which explains that, ultimately, political power is not based on parliament and democratic control but derives from the capitalist state, which consists, in the final analysis, of bodies of armed men committed to uphold the property interests of the bourgeoisie."

A key role in the coup was played by prominent trade union officials, who acted as king-pins in Gillard's installation. Well connected to ruling circles, they provided the essential link in the chain of command that led to the ousting of Rudd.

While union apparatchiks' role has sparked widespread concern within the working class, the middle-class "left" has, predictably, sprung to their defence.

According to Socialist Alternative, Labor powerbrokers and union bosses had a perfect right to depose the prime minister. Socialist Alternative leader Mick Armstrong declared: "There is nothing in the least problematic about union leaders attempting to influence the policies, the leadership and overall direction of the Labor Party."

But in whose interests was this "influence" being wielded? What is the class content of the "policies", "leadership" and "direction" that has emerged from Labor's coup? On all these questions Socialist Alternative remains silent. And for good reason, because an examination of any one of them would rapidly expose the essential article of faith of all the petty-bourgeois tendencies that the trade unions and their apparatuses are "workers' organisations."

The unions' role in the coup has demonstrated the essential significance of their transformation over the past three decades. In every country, vast changes in productive processes associated with globalisation have rendered obsolete their old national-reformist program. The union

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apparatuses have sought to maintain their social position by becoming the agents of globally mobile capital, organising the suppression of their "own" working class in a never-ending downward race for "international competitiveness".

While the pseudo lefts insist that the unions are the sole legitimate vehicle for the struggles of the working class, they are, in reality, part and parcel of a political mechanism dedicated to the ruthless defence of the bourgeois order i.e., the dictatorship of capital. In the June 23-24 coup they assisted in the re-fashioning of the Labor government for policies of open class confrontation.

No section of the trade union apparatus opposed the coup. Within hours of Labor's anti-democratic putsch Australian Council of Trade Unions chief Jeff Lawrence publicly sanctified it with a statement supporting Gillard as prime minister.

The coup has helped shed light on some of the key mechanisms of political rule. The Labor Party acts as a conduit for the dictates of the financial and corporate elite, while its factions, controlled by the union bureaucrats, work to ensure the leadership required to carry them out. The pseudo-left groups play a critical role in this operation by promoting the poisonous political fiction that the Labor Party and the unions are in some way "workers' organisations" and by devoting all their efforts to keeping the working class subordinated to them.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170

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