

Australia: Liberal-National opposition tries to capitalise on carbon tax anger

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Predictions by the Liberal-National opposition and mass media that tens of thousands of people would participate in a “Convoy of No-Confidence” protest outside the federal parliament in Canberra came to little. The demonstration on Monday and Tuesday followed calls by opposition leader Tony Abbott earlier this year for a “people’s revolt” against plans for a carbon tax by the Labor government.

The *Australian*, which gave the “convoy” of trucks and other vehicles from across the country extensive daily coverage, claimed last week that the event would be “the largest protest of its kind seen in Australia.” Hundreds of Canberra workers were advised by their employers to take the day off or work from home on Monday, amid predictions of traffic grid-lock. In fact, the demonstration involved about 400 truck drivers, farmers and other rural business people, as well as old-age pensioners.

The demonstration called for a parliamentary “no-confidence motion” in the Gillard government over its proposed tax as well as its 28-day suspension of the \$320 million annual live-beef export trade to Indonesia in June and July, following protests by anti-animal-cruelty groups.

Along with deep-seated opposition to the carbon tax, those protesting in Canberra were justifiably concerned that the tax would seriously impact on their livelihoods. Hundreds of export-oriented farmers, owner-drivers and other small businesses are already being hit by the high Australian dollar and other escalating costs.

The purpose of the carbon tax is not to address the impact of carbon dioxide emissions on the climate, but to open the door for finance houses to cash in on lucrative carbon markets. The economic burden will not be borne by the corporate elite but by working people.

The Liberal-National opposition, however, with the assistance of the media, preys on the confused concerns and social distress of layers of small business people and turns their hostility to the Labor government in an entirely reactionary direction. Right-wing populism is blended with Australian jingoism, anti-

communism and a dash of racism to form a vile political brew.

Organised by owner-driver Mick Pattel, a former state candidate for Queensland’s Liberal National Party, the demonstration was used to provide a platform for federal Liberal and National Party leaders. These included Tony Abbott, Barnaby Joyce and Warren Truss, with the event chaired by right-wing talk-back host Alan Jones. Liberal MPs Bronwyn Bishop, Kevin Andrews, Sophie Mirabella and Barry Haase denounced the Gillard government and the Greens in hysterical terms.

Jones ranted against Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s “socialist” government that was “wasting” money on asylum-seekers and had “destroyed democracy” in Australia. He blamed the low numbers at the protest on the government, accusing it of ordering the police to prevent hundreds of trucks and other heavy vehicles from entering the city. In fact, the police provided an escort for the protesting trucks. Jones was joined by climate change sceptic Malcolm Andrews, who dismissed scientific evidence that carbon emissions were leading to global warming as a conspiracy organised by the United Nations.

Even among the small turnout, there was an obvious chasm between the populist hot air emanating from those on the stage and the concerns of many of the protesters. While denouncing the Labor government, the Coalition speakers offered no measures that could alleviate the social distress felt by the layers represented in the audience. A Coalition government would be just as ruthless as the Labor Party in defending the interests of the corporate elite at the expense of small business and the working class.

Opposition leader Abbott told the rally: “Even if there is a change of government, I can’t promise that all of your problems will be solved. What I can promise is that there’ll be no carbon tax.” His comments were in line with the demands of the corporate media and big business that he had to desist from making populist promises.

An August 16 editorial in *Australian* newspaper that there was “no justification for the early election [that the convoy’s] organisers want.” All politicians, it continued, “should be listening, but must not be steamrolled into simplistic, populist reactions.” In other words, the Coalition had to fall into line with the austerity agenda being implemented by Labor before it would be considered a viable alternative government.

The “Convoy of No-Confidence” is the latest in a long line of attempts, particularly by the Murdoch media, to fan Australian jingoism and right-wing demagoguery. That distressed layers of farmers and small business people are drawn into such protests is largely the responsibility of the Labor Party and the trade unions, which have systematically suppressed any independent political movement of the working class. Only a workers’ government based on socialist policies can offer any genuine economic relief to small businesses, by expropriating the banks and major corporations and reorganising production under the democratic control of working people on the basis of human need, not private profit.

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Phillip, a truck driver from the New South Wales town of Griffith, who also operates a small post office, told the WSWS: “This [carbon tax] will squash me as an independent driver. But it’s not just drivers—it’s all the small businesses and communities they live in which will feel the flow-on effect. We don’t need another tax. Every year things are getting harder. My wife and I run a post office in Griffith, and people don’t spend as much there as they did before. Everyone is tightening their belts.”

Asked whether he thought the Liberals were offering an alternative to this situation, Phillip replied: “I think Labor and Liberal and all the other parties are full of spin. Politicians just lie all the time. I’m hoping that the Liberals offer an alternative on this issue though. I actually come from a family of traditional Labor voters. My grandfather voted Labor, but he would roll over in his grave if he saw what was happening here.”

Andy, a landscaper from Sydney, said a carbon tax would compound his increasingly difficult struggle to earn a decent income. “The carbon tax is pathetic. I really don’t know what effect it will have on my work—I don’t think anyone really knows yet. But working as a landscaper, most of the products I use are produced by the mining and construction sector, which will pass on their costs as the tax comes in. There is no reason for the tax; they haven’t proven that it will be of any benefit to the environment.”

Marlene, from Bullo in the Northern Territory, said: “Gillard

says ~~made~~ television, ~~clear~~ farmers are doing it tough.’ But it is well past that—it’s fatal. Australia generally exports roughly 1,000,000 cattle every year, and up to 80 percent of them go to Indonesia. Indonesia is the biggest single market for Australian producers, and they have just shut it off.” She explained that many truck drivers’ livelihoods also were totally dependent upon the cattle trade.

Beef producers from north Queensland’s gulf country said they had attended the rally not only to protest the carbon tax and the live-beef trade suspension but because they were facing major economic pressures. One said: “This is much worse than the beef slump we faced in the early 1970s. Our costs are on the rise all the time—the banks are putting pressure on us, we can’t keep labour because the mining companies pay higher rates, and our operating costs for equipment, fencing and everything else is constantly on the rise.

“I don’t know what the answer is but we’re not just here because of Gillard. If the other lot don’t give us what we need to survive, we’ll be back here again.”

Rick, a Bendigo truck owner-driver, said he had driven to the rally with his wife and daughter. “There’s no way I’ll be able to recoup the costs of the carbon tax. No way. This will probably push me out of business. The blokes starting out now haven’t got a hope—they’re owned by the banks.”

A third generation owner-driver who had worked in the industry for 27 years, Rick said: “I don’t want two trucks or fifty trucks. I have one and that’s all I want. I just want to be able to work in the industry as an owner-driver and just to have a good life, a happy wife and family, and quality time to spend with them. How’s that wrong?”

“The authorities keep saying we have to work smarter. I’ve done that, but there’s a limit. Where are the multinational trucking companies today? What sort of deal has been done? I think they’re in bed with the Gillard government. If they said there’s no carbon tax, it wouldn’t happen. Things are being ripped out from underneath us.”



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