

Australia: A historic rout of Labor in Queensland election

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After two decades in office, implementing a pro-business program, the Labor Party government in the Australian state of Queensland was last Saturday routed in the biggest election defeat in the state's history, and one of the greatest anti-government swings—almost 16 percentage points—ever in Australia.

From holding 51 seats in the state's 89-member parliament, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) will be reduced to a rump of between six and eleven seats, depending on the final outcome in a handful of closely contested electorates. The devastating loss is an historic milestone: in the state where the party was founded in 1891, the ALP has lost what remained of its core support in the working class.

As a result, the conservative Liberal National Party (LNP) will control up to 78 seats. After being in office for all but two years since 1989, Labor has paved the way for an even more right-wing government that will intensify the assault on the jobs, conditions and basic rights of working people. Incoming Premier Campbell Newman has already appointed an interim three-man cabinet, met with senior officials and discussed deep cuts to public services and jobs.

Newman hid his plans during the election campaign, claiming that he would fix the state's long rundown hospitals, schools and public transport. But his central pledge to the financial markets—to wipe out the budget deficit by 2014-15—means slashing spending by an estimated \$4 billion from this year. The only increased funding will be to prepare for the resulting social unrest by expanding the police force by another 1,100 within four years, building on the ALP's 57 percent boost since 1998.

Among those publicly celebrating the LNP victory was mining billionaire Clive Palmer, the state's richest individual and the LNP's largest donor. His personal worth—estimated to exceed \$6 billion—epitomises the glaring social inequality fuelled by the mining boom, which has helped to devastate manufacturing, tourism and other industries. Palmer and others are now demanding greater tax concessions and access to lower-

cost labour.

In response to the massive loss, both the outgoing Premier Anna Bligh and Prime Minister Julia Gillard defended the ALP's sweeping privatisations and other pro-market measures. Gillard issued a statement promising her government would work with the LNP to deliver her government's "big reform agenda."

Bligh abruptly resigned as ALP state leader yesterday, and quit her parliamentary seat as well, breaching a pre-election commitment not to do so. Her departure leaves Labor leaderless, with all but two of her ministers defeated, including Treasurer and Deputy Premier Andrew Fraser.

The swing against Labor was strongest in working class areas, with its primary vote plummeting by up to almost 30 percent—four times the shift in more middle-class, inner-city neighbourhoods. Across the southern and western suburbs of Brisbane, Labor lost its "safest" seats, such as Ipswich, where its vote fell to 30.7 percent—down by 29.2. Even in the four seats it retained, the ALP no longer has majority support. Its highest vote was 46.7 percent in both Woodridge (down 22.8) and in Inala (down 17.9).

For the first time in 100 years, the ALP will hold no seats in the northern cities of Cairns and Townsville, in the central mining areas, and on the Gold and Sunshine coasts to the south and north of Brisbane respectively. Labor lost the seat of Cairns for the first time since 1904, its vote falling 17.4 points to just 28.2 percent.

Across the state, Labor's vote collapsed to 26.6 percent, on a par with the humiliating result a year ago in the neighbouring state of New South Wales. A similar vote federally would also decimate the Gillard government. Every seat in Queensland would be lost, including those of Treasurer Wayne Swan and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Since Labor won office federally in 2007, it has now lost government in the four most populous states—New South

Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia—and barely survived in the remaining states and territories. From a landslide defeat of the hated Howard government in 2007, within four-and-a-half years, the ALP has opened the door for the return of the Liberal National Coalition.

Gillard and her ministers claimed that the Queensland result was decided by purely state issues, but the hostility to Bligh was a product of the same austerity agenda now being implemented at the federal level.

Just three months after the last state election in 2009, Bligh repudiated her election promises to defend, not cut, public services. She announced a \$15 billion sell-off of public enterprises, axing thousands of jobs, and the abolition of the state's 8 cent a litre petrol subsidy, helping to send working-class living costs soaring. There was an outraged public response, with opinion polls indicating 80 percent opposition.

Explicitly backed by then Deputy Prime Minister Gillard, Bligh declared that her decision was essential to restore the state's AAA-credit rating in the wake of the global financial crisis. Bligh, who has been praised throughout the corporate media for her "political audacity", yesterday insisted the privatisations were "absolutely necessary." Gillard paid tribute to her, describing her as a hugely talented leader who had worked hard to deliver Labor's reforms for the state.

Like governments around the world, including social democratic administrations, Bligh enforced the dictates of the financial markets. The ALP's measures, though not yet on the same order as the austerity programs imposed in Greece, Italy and other European countries, have already had a devastating impact on working-class living standards, producing mass unemployment and acute financial stress (see: "Brisbane voters speak to the WSWS").

Premier-designate Newman claimed that the election result was an emphatic vote of trust in the LNP and his slogan of transforming Queensland into a "can-do place." In reality, the vote was an overwhelming vote of disgust toward the ALP. Only about half the anti-ALP swing—8.1 percent—went to the LNP, which won just under 50 percent of the formal votes cast statewide.

The other main beneficiary was Bob Katter's Australian Party, which sought to divert hostility to Labor's pro-business program by denouncing privatisation and advancing a protectionist platform. Katter's new party, based on a reactionary blend of populism and nationalism, gained 11.6 percent. While it won only two rural seats, its vote reached 30 percent in other regional areas, and 15 percent in some working-class electorates, such as Ipswich.

The Greens' vote fell 0.8 percentage points to 7.6, and they failed to win their targeted inner-Brisbane seat of Mount Coot-tha, where their tally dropped by 3.5 percent to just below 20 percent. The Greens have been discredited by propping up Gillard's minority government, and joining a coalition government with the right-wing ALP administration in Tasmania. Their primary election pitch was to offer similar parliamentary "stability" in Queensland.

Likewise, the pseudo-radical Socialist Alliance sought to keep youth and workers tied to the corpse of the ALP and the trade unions. Its campaign appealed to the unions to mount a campaign against privatisation—that is, to the same organisations that shut down strikes and protests by thousands of workers against the Bligh government's public asset sell-off.

The shift in working-class allegiances away from Labor, which has been underway for three decades, has now reached a new level. In the early 1980s, the ALP repudiated the nostrums of social reform and transformed itself openly into an agency for the banks and corporations. Its old national reformist program—seeking to win limited reforms within the framework of a nationally regulated economy—was shattered by the globalisation of production.

Since the 2008 global crash, finance capital has unleashed a new stage in the worldwide assault on the social position of the working class. The Gillard government, and its state Labor counterparts, have been fully committed to this program. The Queensland rout demonstrates, however, that hostility, by itself, cannot answer this offensive. Labor's defeat has only made way for a LNP regime that will step up the onslaught. This bitter experience demonstrates the necessity for a conscious political break from the pro-capitalist perspective of Laborism and a turn to the only progressive alternative: a socialist and internationalist program.



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