Australian Greens “break” with Labor, but pledge “stability”

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Having spent two years propping up the minority Labor government and supporting its key policies, the Australian Greens have decided that, since Labor faces electoral annihilation, it is time to jump the sinking ship. Last month Prime Minister Julia Gillard nominated September 14 for the next federal election.

In a speech to the National Press Club yesterday, Greens leader Christine Milne made clear that the party’s election campaign will consist of populist attacks on the major mining corporations in order to try to provide a safety valve for deepening hostility to the two major parties, by posturing as a “progressive” alternative.

Denouncing the political influence of the “billionaire miners”, Milne declared that “in Australia today, it is the mining industry and its parliamentary indentured servants in both major parties, versus the people and the Greens.”

Milne said that the Labor government had effectively ended its agreement with the Greens when it refused to back the Greens’ proposals to boost revenue from the Minerals Resource Rent Tax (MRRT). The tax generated just $126 million in its first six months, compared to a government forecast of $2 billion for the first year of operation.

Milne’s populism over the MRRT, however, plumbed the depths of cynicism. The tax was drafted in large part by key representatives of the big mining companies and only exists in its current form because the Greens voted in the upper house of the parliament, the Senate, to pass it into law.

The Greens were fully aware of the huge concessions that had been made by Gillard and Treasurer Wayne Swan to the miners. These included limiting the tax to iron ore and coal, increasing the profit threshold at which it was levied and compensating the companies for any increase in state government royalty levies on mining production. At the time, corporate executives and financial commentators noted that the mining companies would pay next to no additional tax. Now the Greens declare they are shocked!

Milne’s real fear is that the Greens have been tainted by their support for the Gillard government, including its militarist alignment with the United States against China, persecution of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, brutal treatment of refugees, imposition of a market-based tax on carbon emissions and budget cuts to education, health and social welfare. As an unnamed Labor Party source accurately told the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday: “We are smelly and the Greens don’t like the stench and they know we will take them down with us.”

Despite her criticisms, Milne did not withdraw support from the Labor government. Immediately after declaring the alliance with Labor at an end, she promised that the Greens would deliver “confidence and supply” and seek to keep the minority government in place until the nominated election date. The reference to “supply” is a guarantee that the Greens will pass Labor’s next budget in May. “The Greens,” she said, “will not add to the instability that Labor creates for itself every day.” They will continue to prop up the Labor government until the last.

Moreover, the pledge to serve as a force of stability in the parliament points to the calculations already taking place in Green circles on their relations with an incoming Liberal/National Party government.

Milne extolled the virtues of the Greens continuing to hold the balance of power in the Senate against the threat of an “Abbott-controlled” Senate. Indicating the preparedness of her party to work with a Liberal/National Party government, Milne said the

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election of Greens to the Senate would act as a "bulwark against an Abbott government" and that there was need for strong Greens voices "if the Coalition is to be dragged back to a more humane agenda and into the 21st century."

Milne promised that the Greens would use a Senate balance of power to block any attempt by an Abbott government to repeal either the MRRT or the tax on carbon emissions. She made no guarantee, however, that the Greens would block austerity budget cuts, whether by the Coalition or by Labor, if it managed to get re-elected. This is under conditions in which both major parties are committed to an unprecedented assault on public spending and therefore public health, education, welfare and jobs.

Milnes's pledge to block tax changes was directed, above all, to those sections of the Australian corporate elite that either benefit directly from carbon trading, such as sectors of finance and so-called "green" entrepreneurs, or are suffering from the dominance of the mining sector. "The mining boom," Milne said, "has led to a persistently high Australian dollar and has done major damage to our manufacturing, agricultural and tourist industries."

In an appeal for corporate backing, Milne said: "It is time that the critical mass of Australian business which now depend on the transition to a low carbon future stand up and be counted… an Abbott government will try to destroy your business, will wipe out the fastest growing innovative business and jobs growth sector. That is why the Greens must be in the balance of power in the Senate."

Various pseudo-left organisations in Australia, particularly Socialist Alliance, continually promote the Greens as some type of "left" or even anti-capitalist alternative for workers and youth. Milnes's speech serves to highlight the bogus character of such claims. The Greens are a bourgeois party that speaks for and is orientated toward sections of business, large and small, and affluent layers of the upper middle class.

Significantly, Milne raised not one word of opposition to the Gillard government's support for the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" against China, including the expanded use by the US of Australian military bases and ongoing Australian involvement in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The omission is a signal that the Greens will try to block any public discussion about the dangers of militarism and war in the lead up to the September 14 election.

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