

Australian PM proposes “democratic” changes to Labor’s voting rules

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Ahead of a federal election due within months, recently reinstalled Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is continuing his campaign to refashion the Australian Labor Party apparatus. After directing Labor’s National Executive to take over the running of the party’s corruption-ridden New South Wales branch, Rudd now proposes to replace the method for selecting Labor’s federal leader, which currently involves only parliamentarians and their factional chiefs, with a combined ballot of parliamentarians and party members.

The change is aimed at promoting a bogus new “democratic” façade to the hollowed-out right-wing bureaucracy that is the Labor Party. At the same time, Rudd is signalling to the corporate elite that he intends to proceed with its demands for austerity and pro-business restructuring, unhindered by the sectional interests of the trade union bureaucracy. He intends to take the proposal to a Labor caucus meeting for ratification later this month.

In announcing his plan, Rudd worked to exploit the continuing public anger over the 2010 Labor Party coup that removed him from office and installed Julia Gillard. The ouster of Rudd, carried out overnight by a small cabal of factional powerbrokers behind the backs of the Australian people, provoked widespread hostility. Neither Gillard nor her supporters anticipated the reaction, and she never recovered from the backlash in the working class.

In 2010, Rudd, no doubt aware of the powerful forces behind Gillard, which included the US embassy and key sections of big business, made no challenge to his removal. Now, however, he is using public hostility to the coup to ensure that any Labor leader, once installed, will be difficult to remove.

Under the new rules, Labor members will be able to

vote in a leadership ballot, with their collective votes given a 50 percent weighting, while Labor parliamentarians’ votes will comprise the other 50 percent. Once elected, a Labor leader will only be able to be removed if three-quarters of the parliamentary caucus sign a petition demanding an election, on the narrow grounds that the current leader has brought the party into disrepute.

Rudd declared: “The mechanisms outlined in the proposed rule change prevent anyone from just wandering in [to the prime minister’s office] one day or one night, and saying ‘okay sunshine, it’s over’.”

The prime minister and his backers have absurdly portrayed the new proposals as heralding the dawn of a new era of democracy within the Labor Party. “The reforms will ensure that power will never again rest in the hands of a factional few,” he declared. “I believe it will encourage people to reengage in the political process and to bring back those supporters who have become disillusioned ... We’re sending out a very clear message across the entire nation that you, as a valued member of our party, one of the tens of thousands of people across the entire Australian family, you get a say in who becomes the national leader of our party by direct vote.”

This is all an utter fraud. References by Rudd and other government figures to “tens of thousands” of Labor members are aimed at covering over Labor’s collapse as a mass party based in the working class.

Most of Labor’s nominal membership of around 40,000 people comprises inactive “paper” members. An internal party review conducted three years ago for the party’s national executive concluded that the party faced the threat of organisational collapse. Between 2007 and 2010, a quarter of the membership, or more than 13,000 people, quit the party. The review admitted

that the combined membership of the Greens and other so-called third parties was “ten times the size of the Labor Party.” In recent elections, the Labor Party has been unable to mobilise enough members and supporters to cover election booths to distribute “how to vote” information—an unprecedented situation for the 120-year-old party, which was created primarily as an electoral machine.

Labor’s membership collapse has nothing to do with how the party leader is elected. Like its labour and social democratic counterparts around the world, the Australian Labor Party has lurched to the right over the last three decades. Under the 1983–1996 Hawke-Keating governments, Labor and the trade unions responded to the emergence of globalised capitalist production methods by junking their previous program of national economic regulation and limited social reform in favour of economic and corporate “restructuring”, privatisations, job slashing and a major assault on social services. As a result, the Labor Party is largely despised throughout the working class.

The proposed change to the party’s rules is not just a response to the current inner-party turmoil, but is aimed at giving its parliamentary leadership a freer hand in imposing unpopular, pro-business economic measures.

The unofficial campaign for the forthcoming election is proceeding at the same time as a deepening economic crisis. Whereas the mining export boom provided a limited buffer for Australian capitalism in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, China’s economic slowdown and credit crunch is triggering sharply lower economic growth forecasts and accelerating layoffs. This has added greater urgency to the demands by Australian ruling circles for European-style austerity spending cuts and greater workplace productivity by slashing the wages and conditions of the working class.

Gillard’s factional dependence upon the trade unions had come to be regarded as an obstacle to this agenda. For three decades, the unions have worked hand in hand with big business in suppressing the opposition of workers to the endless drive for greater productivity and “competitiveness.” But powerful sections of corporate Australia now regard the unions as a dispensable overhead expense and, in some instances, an outright obstacle to its restructuring agenda. Earlier this year, Gillard drew the ire of the Murdoch and financial press for lining up behind union campaigns

against “foreigners” on 457 guest worker visas, and for thinly-veiled protectionist measures that provided Australian manufacturing companies with greater access to contracts for major mining and infrastructure projects.

Rudd returned to the Labor leadership in the face of continued opposition from key union powerbrokers, who remained behind Gillard. While moving to shore up his own precarious position within the government, the prime minister is, at the same time, signalling to corporate Australia that its demands can now be directly transmitted to the Lodge, without any hindrance from the union bureaucracy.

If the rule change is implemented, Labor leaders will be virtually impossible to remove from office, regardless of how unpopular their policies are. Rudd’s “democratisation” drive foreshadows, in reality, the deeply anti-democratic methods that will be used, by whichever party wins office in the forthcoming election, to implement an accelerated onslaught on the jobs, working conditions and living standards of the working class.



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