

Katter's Australian Party: A nationalist political trap

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The emergence of more than 50 parties, many of them new, to contest the 2013 Australian federal election is a measure of the widespread alienation from, and antagonism towards, the major parties of the political establishment—Labor, Liberal and the Greens.

Among them is Katter's Australian Party (KAP), founded last year by right-wing federal parliamentarian Bob Katter. Based on a northern Queensland rural constituency, Katter is seeking to extend his influence nationally, contesting seats across the country.

In Queensland, the newly-formed KAP picked up nearly 12 percent of the vote in last year's state election, when the Labor Party, after two decades in office, was reduced to a rump of just seven members of the state parliament. Although the KAP won only two rural seats, its vote was as high as 30 percent in some coal mining regions and Brisbane working class suburbs.

Katter's party is a reactionary outfit, cynically seeking to exploit the financial ruin facing wide layers of farmers and small business operators. It aims to divert hostility toward the major parties, and the banks and big business, in a toxic nationalist direction. The KAP blames "foreign" imports and land purchases, particularly by Chinese corporations, for the crisis confronting many farmers. To whip up xenophobia, it denounces the Woolworths-Coles supermarket oligopoly for importing cheaper food products from Asia, and claims that "the whole Australian land mass will be up for sale—whether it's to the Chinese or the Callathumpians."

The KAP is making a similar nationalist pitch to workers, especially in the mining, food processing, and manufacturing sectors, who are being hit by the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, along with attacks on basic rights and conditions. Katter agitates against "foreign workers", who are allegedly "stealing" their jobs. In parliament last month, he vowed to stop the "importation of foreign fly-ins" if the KAP wins the balance of power in the Senate.

Katter holds out the false hope of winding back the clock to a nationally-insulated economy, propped up by tariff trade

barriers. He is harking back to the founding protectionist programs of the agrarian-based Country Party, the pre-1980s forerunner of the National Party, and the Australian Labor Party and trade unions.

As long as production remained largely confined within the capitalist nation-state framework, these parties could obtain limited concessions for their respective constituencies. These included nationally-set award wages for workers, and subsidies and marketing boards to ensure minimum prices for farmers' produce, such as wheat, wool, milk, meat and sugar.

But this entire framework has been irrevocably shattered over the past three decades by the ever-greater globalisation of production, dominated by transnational banks, finance houses and corporate conglomerates. These global giants constantly shift and restructure their operations on every continent, in a ruthless drive to boost profits, at the expense of wages and conditions.

Katter's party is seeking to turn workers away from the only means of fighting this corporate onslaught—a unified struggle with their fellow workers worldwide, who are the victims of the same companies and banks.

Like his father, Bob Katter senior, whose sprawling rural electorate he inherited, Katter was a long-time member of the Country and National parties. He served as a cabinet minister in the Queensland state government of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen in 1985 when it sacked more than 1,000 SEQEB electricity workers and replaced them with contractors. A year-long struggle by the SEQEB workers was eventually worn down and sold out by the trade unions.

After sitting in state, then federal, parliament as a Country or National MP from 1974, Katter broke from the Nationals in 2001. The National Party's embrace of "free market" policies from the 1970s, as part of its coalition with the business-based Liberal Party, decimated its own social and electoral base. Thousands of small farmers were bankrupted and forced off their properties, leaving rural townships reeling as banks, retail stores, schools, medical services and other essential facilities followed in their wake.

Katter split from the Nationals in order to survive politically. “I had to get out of the National Party because they were ruining my electorate,” he declared, citing the destruction of the sugar and tobacco industries and the loss of jobs in fisheries and boat building. “When they deregulated dairy, I had just reached the end of the road.”

Anyone still labouring under the illusion that the trade union bureaucracy in any way represents the interests of the working class should take note of the involvement of one former leading official in Katter’s party. Far from being repelled by Katter’s anti-working class record, former Electrical Trades Union (ETU) Victorian state secretary Dean Michell is attracted by it and has become the KAP’s “industrial relations policy consultant.”

There is no contradiction between Michell’s present position and his previous record. Michell is a representative of the “left” sections of the trade union bureaucracy that played the central role in imposing the union movement’s Accords with the Hawke Keating governments that led to the lowering of wages, and an attack on jobs and working condition between 1983 and 1996. In the past, Michell was heavily promoted by the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance.

Well aware of the unions’ critical role in suppressing workers’ struggles, Katter advocates compulsory arbitration of workplace disputes. This was the framework used by Labor and the unions during the first eight decades of the Australian federation to subordinate workers to the profit requirements of business via the industrial courts.

Katter’s plan would help the trade unions police cuts to wages, jobs and conditions, amid an accelerating economic crisis. Katter has bluntly explained that his proposals would benefit employers that otherwise “couldn’t get a pay reduction when their incomes were crashed by a slump.”

For all his populist rhetoric, Katter represents the interests of definite sections of business, and large ones at that. In 2011-12, according to the Electoral Commission, the KAP obtained over \$2 million in donations. Alongside the ETU and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (\$50,000 each), the major donors were billionaire James Packer (\$250,000) and the Manildra Group, Australia’s biggest ethanol producer (\$100,000). Others included multi-millionaire right-wing media and racehorse owner John Singleton, gun manufacturer NIOA, and shooters’ organisations.

In return, the KAP demands compulsory “ethanol content in fuels”, a policy that favours the ethanol companies. In order to prop up the national auto industry, which is dominated by Ford, General Motors and Toyota, Katter urges the Labor government to “mandate all motor vehicles purchased under a government contract will be Australian-made.”

Far from challenging the big banks, Katter serves their interests as well. Last month, he proposed legislation for banks to write off up to half of the \$66 billion mountain of debt hanging over the heads of farmers, and for a government board to offer refinancing at lower interest rates. He emphasised that this would benefit the banks themselves. “Under this arrangement, the banks offload the bad debt and have a reduced loss,” he said.

In line with his nationalist agitation, Katter advocates a military build-up in the Indian Ocean, supposedly to intercept refugee boats. Last year he called for 100 supersized patrol boats, each “built to take six cruise missiles.” Such a force, deployed along China’s Indian Ocean trade routes, would dovetail with the Labor government’s commitment to the Obama administration’s military and strategic “pivot” to Asia to confront China.

In seeking to divert the struggle of workers against the destruction of jobs by pitting them against each other on national lines, Katter is proving grist to the mill of US preparations for war against China.

The Katter party is a reactionary nationalist trap. The only way out of the social devastation created by the breakdown of the global profit system is the program of socialist internationalism fought for by the Socialist Equality Party: the unification of the struggles of the working class across national borders in the fight to bring to power workers’ governments that place the banks and basic industries under social ownership and democratic control of working people.

A workers’ government implementing socialist policies is likewise the sole means for providing genuine relief for the small farmers whose interests Katter falsely claims to represent.

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