Australian Labor Party props up Victorian state government

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Amid deepening popular hostility toward the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, the Labor Party has provided crucial support to the Coalition government in the key state of Victoria following a sordid series of developments in the state parliament.

After former state government backbencher turned "independent" MP Geoff Shaw last month threatened to trigger an early election, the Labor opposition refused to use its numbers in the parliament to bring down Premier Denis Napthine's government. At the same time, it voted with the Napthine government to pass its latest anti-working class austerity budget, which dovetails with the federal budget handed down by Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government.

The government in Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, had a precarious one-seat majority after the last state election in November 2010. In March last year, however, Shaw quit the government. Six months later he was charged with 23 criminal offences relating to the alleged misuse of his parliamentary car and fuel card.

In December, the state Director of Public Prosecutions dropped these charges but referred the case to the Parliamentary Privileges Committee. This body recommended a fine of $6,838 over Shaw's misuse of his taxpayer-funded car. Shaw ignored the ruling, claiming persecution because of his right-wing anti-abortion advocacy.

Shaw continued to back the government, while advocating changes to Victoria's abortion laws. Last November, reports emerged that Premier Napthine had secretly helped Shaw draft prospective legislation changing Victoria's abortion laws.

Napthine and Shaw's working relationship broke down last month, in circumstances that remain unclear. The premier held a press conference on June 3 accusing the MP of threatening to bring down the government unless all threatened sanctions over his alleged parliamentary car misuse were dropped. Napthine also accused Shaw of demanding a specific judicial appointment.

Shaw denied the allegations, and declared he would side with the Labor Party if a no-confidence motion was moved in parliament. This immediately raised the spectre of the government being brought down and an early election triggered by the British Queen's official representative, Governor Alex Chernov.

The Labor opposition responded to the threatened constitutional crisis by pledging its absolute commitment to "parliamentary stability." Opposition leader Daniel Andrews adamantly refused to move a motion of no confidence that would remove the government.

The Labor Party also backed the government's budget. Attempting to ensure that widespread opposition within the working class to the government's cuts remains within the framework of the two-party parliamentary system, opposition MPs spoke in parliament against the government's savage cuts to TAFE funding, privatised toll road program, and inadequate spending on healthcare, transport and other public services.

They all voted in favour of the budget bills, however, using the same sham pretext advanced by their federal Labor Party colleagues when they lined up behind Abbott's budget appropriation bills, i.e., the need to ensure funding for public sector workers' wages. (See: "Australian Senate pushes through budget appropriation bills")

Labor's manager of opposition business, Jacinta Allen, boasted on June 10 that it was "the Labor opposition that has facilitated—indeed been the initiator

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of—this bill and the two preceding budget bills being moved, considered and passed by this house. It was not the heavy lifting of the government that got this bill considered by the house."

The Greens similarly voted in favour of the budget bills. Party leader Greg Barber told parliament there were "truly massive surpluses in this budget … and I give credit to the government where it is due for turning in those surpluses".

The all-party pro-austerity line up underscored the bogus character of the subsequent squabbling over Shaw's fate.

Andrews appealed to the government to expel Shaw from parliament, urging an end to the "circus." The Labor Party aimed to rebut government allegations that it was colluding with an allegedly corrupt parliamentarian, but was more fundamentally concerned with demonstrating to the ruling elite its commitment to political "stability."

Andrews' expulsion demand was deeply antidemocratic. Shaw has not been convicted of any offence. Expulsion of a member of parliament effectively strips the right of a given electorate to choose its representative.

To avoid having to try to cling to office without a parliamentary majority, the government instead voted to suspend Shaw, with his return conditional on a formal apology and payment of the nearly $7,000 fine. This was backed by the *Australian* and *Australian Financial Review*, with the latter explaining in an editorial that the government's "reasonable track record, including a budget in early May which delivered solid surpluses" meant that it "should get on with governing."

The message was directed as much to the Labor Party as it was to Napthine's government. State Labor leader Andrews eagerly heeded the call as part of his campaign to win the backing of big business ahead of the state election scheduled for November.

The Napthine government faces the threat of being the first one-term state government in Victoria since the early 1950s, amid enormous anger in the working class over both its record and the Abbott government's budget assault on welfare and basic services.

Labor does not want to come to office under conditions of a working class movement against the Napthine and Abbott governments. It is attempting to capitalise on the public disaffection by issuing limited appeals to anti-austerity sentiment, while at the same time preparing to implement the same agenda if it is returned to office.

Under the previous state government in Victoria, from 1999 to 2010, Labor developed intimate ties with key sections of the corporate elite as it advanced "free market" economic "reforms" that advanced the interests of the ultra-wealthy and business.

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