

Australian state Labor leader quits over Sydney siege-linked letter

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The witch-hunting atmosphere of a national “terrorist” emergency whipped up by the political and media establishment over last week’s Sydney café siege claimed a direct political scalp yesterday.

New South Wales (NSW) Labor Party leader John Robertson resigned after the release of a letter that he signed, three years ago, on behalf of Man Haron Monis, the siege hostage-taker, when Monis was a constituent in Robertson’s western Sydney electorate.

It was reported on Monday that in 2011, Robertson’s electoral office passed on an appeal by Monis to the NSW Department of Family and Community Services to have a one-hour supervised visit with his children on Fathers’ Day. Monis had an apprehended violence order out against him at the time, and was the subject of family court proceedings.

Such representations on behalf of residents of a parliamentarian’s electorate are routine and frequent. Robertson said the correspondence was not an endorsement of Monis’s request and members of parliament signed “thousands” of similar letters every year. In fact, this kind of correspondence is regarded as a core function of a local MP, acting as a representative for constituents in dealing with official agencies.

Nevertheless, reports of Robertson’s letter were splashed all over the mainstream media, and his state Labor leadership was immediately described as “untenable.” Within a day, he called a press conference to stand down. “It has become clear to me that I’ve lost the support of some of my Labor colleagues,” Robertson said.

Robertson’s removal, and his abject acceptance of it, are a product of the reactionary political climate being whipped up around the Sydney siege. The tragic deaths of two hostages who died when police stormed the café are being blamed on Monis and anyone who might

have had any association with him, no matter how innocent or limited. Monis was a disturbed individual with a long record of erratic behavior, not a terrorist linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Robertson, like the entire Labor leadership nationally, backed the massive police operation in central Sydney to the hilt, paying tribute to “the extraordinary efforts of our police and other emergency personnel.” Having helped create a climate of hysteria surrounding the siege, he could hardly challenge the insinuation that he had aided a “terrorist.” In resigning, Robertson declared that while his representation for Monis was “a routine matter,” he accepted “how this letter may appear given recent events.”

Robertson was not the first casualty of the fallout from the café siege. Lawyers who represented Monis in court cases where he contested criminal charges laid against him have received death threats. Magistrates have been vilified for granting him bail in two criminal prosecutions, even though they did so on the basis that the cases against Monis were “weak” and “circumstantial.” On Monday, acting on an application by the state government itself, the NSW Chief Magistrate revoked the bail previously granted to Monis’s widow Amirah Droudis.

These court-related issues have far-reaching implications for basic legal and democratic rights. If lawyers are attacked for representing a defendant in a criminal trial, what is left of the right to a trial? If magistrates deny bail at the behest of governments, what remains of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty?

These ominous developments dovetail with the “review” launched by Prime Minister Tony Abbott into the siege, which explicitly targets the granting of bail and access to legal aid, and hence legal representation,

along with the rights of asylum seekers and welfare recipients.

Robertson, a former head of the state's trade union federation, had been the NSW opposition leader since the 2011 state election, when the previous longstanding Labor government was defeated in a landslide, driven by widespread hostility in the working class to its corrupt and pro-business record.

His removal, while triggered by the Monis letter furore, is aimed at furthering the demands of the financial and corporate elite for a far more sweeping assault on jobs, working conditions and social services, amid falling commodity prices and a rapid deterioration of the Australian economy.

Robertson became the second NSW party leader to be removed by underhanded methods this year. In April, Barry O'Farrell abruptly quit as state premier and Liberal Party leader, supposedly for misleading the state's corruption commission about receiving a bottle of red wine from a property developer.

As the WSWs explained at the time, O'Farrell's departure was certainly not about a mere bottle of wine. O'Farrell had been accused by the media of being too hesitant in enforcing austerity and privatisation measures, so he was replaced by his treasurer, Mike Baird, who quickly unveiled more than \$20 billion worth of public asset sales.

Baird has been universally promoted by the media for his "strong performance" throughout the Sydney siege. He has also been hailed by big business for leading the way nationally in devising means to try to overcome deep popular opposition to the wholesale privatisation of public utilities and infrastructure.

Robertson, by contrast, was lambasted throughout the media for his supposed resistance to asset sell-offs, dating back to his time as head of Unions NSW. In reality, while posturing as an opponent of privatisation, Robertson, was complicit in the initial partial sell-off of the state's electricity network by the previous Labor government. However, such posturing can no longer be tolerated by the financial elite.

Robertson's ouster underscores the manner in which the invocation of a national terrorist crisis is being used to prosecute the domestic agenda of austerity, including public sector job destruction, as well as the foreign policy of unconditional support for US-led wars in the Middle East and internationally.

Labor's state parliamentarians will meet on January 5 to select a replacement for Robertson. Ironically, in his resignation speech Robertson claimed that one achievement of his leadership was the introduction of ballots of party members to decide the party leadership, insisting that this was a victory for democracy that would help restore Labor's image.

But the party's rule change overrides the requirement for any such ballot within six months of a state election. An election is due next March, so Robertson's successor will be installed in the same manner as he was deposed—via backroom manoeuvres to satisfy the demands of the media and corporate establishment.



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