

Labor pledges to match budget cutting in Australian state election

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13 January 2015

After the first week of the campaign for the snap election being held in the Australian state of Queensland on January 31, it is already clear that the Labor Party opposition has no real differences with the program of austerity, expanded police powers and militarism being implemented by the Liberal National Party (LNP) government of Premier Campbell Newman.

Over the past year, Queensland, long touted as a “mining boom” state, has become one of the sharpest indicators of the worsening impact of the post-2008 global economic breakdown, which is now gutting prices for the state’s coal and gas exports and driving up official unemployment levels to around 20 percent in some working class areas.

Both major parties have pledged to satisfy the demands of the global financial markets and the corporate elite for the slashing of the state’s near \$3 billion budget deficit, which means deepening the assault on essential social services such as health, education, housing and welfare.

Labor’s treasury spokesman Curtis Pitt vowed to “at least match” the LNP’s promise of returning the budget to surplus next financial year, despite the collapse of the mining boom cutting state revenues by an estimated \$1 billion this year. He and state Labor leader Annastacia Palaszczuk have refused so far to disclose the “range of measures” they will take in order to do so.

While claiming to oppose the LNP government’s plans to try to restore the state’s AAA credit rating by privatising public assets worth \$37 billion, Labor has assured big business that it will achieve the equivalent result by other means. “When you look at the fact that we have ruled out selling our income-producing assets, we had to look at a range of other measures,” Pitt told

the *Australian* last week. “Those measures will be presented as part of our economic and fiscal strategy.”

Labor, which has also professed to oppose the LNP government’s 14,000 public sector sackings, has no intention of reversing these devastating cuts to jobs and services, let alone those made by the previous state Labor governments of premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh (in which both Palaszczuk and Pitt served as ministers).

In the public health system, for example, where the LNP government axed 4,800 jobs—including those of 1,800 nurses—Labor has promised to employ just 400 new nurses. And this is over four years, and on wages about \$7,000 lower per annum than the average for nurses in the state. Conditions will only worsen in public hospitals, where the LNP government has forced an extra 190,000 people to join the already lengthy queue on surgery waiting lists.

Even this kind of token pledge will be torn up as soon as the election is over, as has happened in every federal and state election in Australia for decades, because of the worsening economic situation and the escalating demands of the financial markets.

During the last Queensland election in 2012, the LNP vowed not to sack public sector workers, only to break that promise within months. It also pledged to create 420,000 new jobs in six years and cut the official unemployment rate to 4 percent. That rate has since risen from 5.5 percent to 6.9 percent. More than 61,000 full-time jobs have been lost, as part of the ongoing avalanche of job destruction throughout the manufacturing and mining industries across Australia.

Three years earlier, in 2009, Bligh’s Labor government made similar promises to create jobs and not sell off public assets. Those vows were also ripped up within months, in the wake of the 2008 financial

crash. Labor unveiled a \$17 billion privatisation of rail, port and forestry assets, destroying thousands of jobs.

The only hint of economic reality has come with Premier Newman's admission that the LNP's \$37 billion privatisation may be affected by falling prices for the assets, such as electricity generators and distribution networks. At the same time, Newman, backed by the federal Liberal National government, has declared that road infrastructure projects can only go ahead if the sell-off succeeds.

Newman's determination to push ahead with his "Strong Choices" privatisation blueprint, despite its unpopularity and the possibility that he will lose his own seat in parliament, is not a personal obsession. It flows directly from the dictates of the corporate elite, which regards the hastily-called election as a litmus test for the full austerity agenda it is demanding that Prime Minister Tony Abbott's equally detested federal government push through this year.

Newman cynically tried to distance himself from Abbott, saying his government was "sovereign and independent of the federal Coalition." Both Newman and Labor's Palaszczuk also declared that they would not form a minority government with the support of minor parties. These statements sought to meet the demands of the corporate and media establishment to avoid another "hung" parliament of the kind that has existed at the federal level since 2010 because of the public hostility to both the traditional ruling parties.

Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten joined Palaszczuk for selected campaign appearances, confining himself to accusing the Abbott government of planning to expand the regressive Goods and Services Tax. He continued, however, to give total bipartisan backing to the Abbott government's exploitation of the terrorist attacks in Paris to justify frontline involvement in the predatory US-led war in the Middle East and further measures to boost the powers and resources of the military, police and intelligence agencies.

Under these conditions, the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups that satellite around them are trying to channel the discontent of the working class back behind the election of yet another Labor administration. While unable to call openly for a Labor vote, precisely because of the revulsion felt to it among workers and young people, the Queensland Council of Unions is urging voters to "put the LNP last." It is calling on

voters to allocate preferences to every candidate, so that their votes will eventually flow back to the Labor Party under the state's optional preferential voting system.

As part of this pro-Labor campaign, the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative is also advocating "Put Liberals last." It is holding out the illusion that a Labor government could be forced by public pressure into making "major improvements to the lives of Queensland workers."

Whether Labor returns to office in Queensland, or Newman's government survives because of the bitter memories of the last Labor government, the trade unions and their fake "socialist" apologists will bear responsibility for the ensuing stepped-up offensive against the jobs, basic services and living conditions of the working class, and the increasing turn by the entire political establishment to militarism abroad and police-state repression at home. They are seeking to chloroform working people about the deepening global economic crisis and prevent the necessary conscious political break from Labor.



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