

Australia: Queensland election reveals wider political crisis

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Queensland's Liberal National Party (LNP) government called a snap election for January 31, hoping to scrape back into office before the former "mining boom" state's economic and social conditions deteriorate further.

Instead, the election campaign has underscored the popular hostility toward the budget-slashing measures of the LNP and the federal Liberal National government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott. It has also demonstrated the increasing instability of the parliamentary system at both federal and state levels in Australia.

Queensland Premier Campbell Newman may lose his own seat in Brisbane, the state capital. Despite currently holding 73 of the 89 seats in state parliament, his government could also become the second first-term Liberal-National state government to lose office within two months following the November 29 defeat of the Victorian government.

As in Victoria, the opposition Labor Party has sought to exploit the seething discontent, while assuring the corporate elite that it will continue the austerity measures imposed both by Newman's government and the previous federal and state Labor governments.

Newman desperately wanted to get the election out of the way before federal parliament resumed for the year. He sought to avoid the backlash from the Abbott government's efforts to push through outstanding budget cuts, such as charges to see doctors, unrestricted fees for tertiary education and welfare entitlement cut-offs for young jobless workers. In no uncertain terms, the LNP told Abbott and his senior ministers to stay out of Queensland throughout the 25-day election campaign.

These political calculations were dashed, however, by the outrage provoked by new Abbott government

moves—trying to force doctors to start charging fees from mid-January, unveiling a Productivity Commission review aimed at abolishing the minimum wage and penalty wage rates for after-hours work, and awarding a knighthood to Britain's Prince Philip. Newman had to posture ridiculously as an opponent of one federal government decision after another.

Newman's government has banked all its election promises—totalling nearly \$10 billion so far—on raising \$37 billion by privatising basic public infrastructure, including ports and the electricity network. Even if those proceeds eventuate, the bulk will go toward paying off government debt in an effort to appease the financial markets and restore the state's AAA credit rating, which was stripped away as soon as the 2008 global crash erupted.

The corporate and media elite has heavily backed the LNP government's re-election, regarding the asset sell-off plan as a test case for privatisation and austerity measures across the country. Yesterday, in its fourth editorial on the election, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* reiterated its praise for Newman's "brave political decisions in what has been a calculated effort to do what is required—to crash or crash through."

However, there is intense opposition in the working class to the sell-off scheme, which would mean the destruction of thousands more public sector jobs. Hostility to privatisation was a major factor in Labor's landslide defeat at the last state election in 2012. Labor Premier Anna Bligh unleashed a \$15 billion asset sales program in 2009, eliminating thousands of jobs, just months after Labor won the 2008 election, in which it made no mention of the plan.

So for this election, state Labor leader Anastacia Palaszczuk, who was a leading minister in Bligh's government, has feigned opposition to the LNP's assets

sales. At the same time, she has attacked the Newman government from the right, accusing it of promising too much spending, funded by a “sugar hit” from privatisations. “I’m not doing wild promises in this campaign,” Palaszcuk declared during a debate with Newman.

Despite claiming to oppose the Newman government’s deep cuts to health, education and other social spending, and 14,000 retrenchments, Labor will not reverse any of these cuts. Palaszcuk yesterday again refused to give dismissed public sector workers “that commitment.” Labor’s token promises, such as to employ 400 more nurses and recruit 875 extra school teachers over four years, will only entrench the damage done.

All discussion of the state’s social crisis has been suppressed by the media and political elite throughout the election campaign.

Devastating job losses have hit workers in mining and mining-related industries over the past two years. More than 10,000 coal-related jobs have been axed alone, decimating communities in central Queensland. Across the state, the flow-on affect is compounding severe unemployment created by years of de-industrialisation and government spending cuts. Joblessness, even on vastly understated official figures, exceeds 20 percent in some southern Brisbane suburbs. Youth unemployment is even higher.

Today 14.8 percent of Queensland residents—about 700,000 people—are living in poverty, and nearly 20,000 are homeless. This poverty figure is up from 12.5 percent in 2010. With house prices plunging by up to 40 percent in recession-hit areas, Queensland has become the worst state in Australia for mortgage defaults.

Both major parties have based their so-called fiscal strategies on claims that a liquefied natural gas (LNG) export boom will suddenly, from next year, reverse the state’s fortunes. In reality, LNG prices have crumbled, roughly in line with those for oil, which have halved in six months, along with iron ore and coal prices. This implosion is expected to reduce previously anticipated LNG revenues nationally by more than \$30 billion a year by 2017-18, gutting state and federal government tax income.

There is bipartisan unity on further boosting the size, weaponry and powers of the police force and imposing

anti-association laws, disguised as “anti-bike gang” laws. This police-state buildup is a preparation to deal with eruptions of social unrest. Its repressive face has already been seen in a series of fatal police shootings in working class areas and the police-military lockdown of Brisbane during last November’s G20 Leaders Summit.

There has been utter silence on another decisive issue, the support of the entire parliamentary establishment for Australia’s involvement, including via Queensland’s military bases, in the US war in the Middle East and its military preparations against China and Russia.

The trade unions, which shut down all resistance to the last Labor government’s assault, and to the LNP’s measures, have promoted a “put the Liberals last” campaign, along with the Greens, fake-left groups like Socialist Alternative and openly right-wing elements such as radio broadcaster Alan Jones, Bob Katter’s Australian Party and mining magnate Clive Palmer’s Palmer United Party. This campaign seeks to channel the hostility toward the political establishment back behind the election of yet another Labor or Labor-led government.

The very fact that Labor could be abruptly hoisted back into office, just three years after being reduced to a parliamentary rump because of its pro-business assault on workers’ jobs and social conditions, is a measure of the crisis of political perspective in the working class. Anger and frustration by itself, no matter how deeply felt, is no answer to the bipartisan offensive by successive Labor and Liberal National governments, which will only intensify, regardless of whether the LNP or Labor forms the next state government.

The Socialist Equality Party is not standing in this election but we urge our readers to study our socialist program, which provides the only way forward for the working class, and join us in the struggle to build a new revolutionary socialist leadership.



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