

Queensland state government defeated in anti-austerity vote

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The Liberal National Party (LNP) government in the Australian state of Queensland was defeated in an unprecedented political reversal at last Saturday's state election. The first-term government was ousted, just three years after it was elected in a landslide victory over the previous Labor Party government.

Premier Campbell Newman became the first Queensland leader in 100 years to lose his own seat. That was the result of intensifying popular hostility to his government's austerity agenda of budget-slashing, job destruction and decimation of social spending, including its elimination of more than 14,000 public sector jobs and \$37 billion privatisation plan.

Outrage at Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the federal government's planned budget measures, especially upfront charges to see doctors, higher tertiary education fees and moves to scrap penalty wage rates, also played a decisive role in the LNP's loss.

The outcome is not just catastrophic for Newman, who immediately declared: "My political career is over." It has deepened the crisis of Abbott's government and the corporate and media elite, which heavily backed the LNP's return as a litmus test for Abbott's efforts to overcome public opposition to his government's austerity offensive.

In Queensland, the Labor Party is likely to form a government, despite having been reduced to just seven seats at the 2012 state election. Labor was thrown out of office because of working class hostility to its imposition of big business dictates, which included a sweeping \$15 billion sell-off of public assets and thousands of public sector job losses.

With breathtaking hypocrisy, Labor claimed to oppose job cuts and privatisation during this election campaign, even though state Labor leader Annastacia Palaszczuk was a leading minister in the previous

Labor government.

Saturday's vote appears to have produced a hung parliament. Labor won 43 of the 89 seats in the state parliament, and was ahead in another electorate after Sunday's vote-counting, which will continue this week. To form a government, Labor may have to secure the support of a conservative independent MP and/or the right-wing populist Katter's Australian Party (KAP).

Rather than a positive vote for Labor, the results pointed to a widespread determination to remove Newman and deal a blow to Abbott. Most voters saw a Labor vote as the only means of doing that. As of yesterday, there was a swing to Labor of 11.4 percentage points. But that only took its vote to 38.1 percent, up from its record low of 26.7 percent in 2012.

Some of the biggest shifts occurred in working class areas, such as Inala, in the southwestern suburbs of Brisbane, the state capital, where Labor's vote rose by 19 percentage points to 69 percent. In the 2012 election, Labor barely retained that seat, which is held by Palaszczuk, now the prospective state premier.

Overall, the LNP still obtained more votes than Labor—41.2 percent—but Labor will win many seats with the aid of preferences from the Greens. The Greens vote rose only marginally, up 0.7 percentage points to 8.4 percent, but reached 22 percent in Brisbane's inner suburbs where the party has a strong base among layers of the upper middle class.

The vote for minor parties fell sharply, and the informal vote was just 2.2 percent, reflecting the underlying intent of striking down Newman and Abbott. Mining magnate Clive Palmer's right-wing Palmer United Party failed to make a significant showing, polling less than 5 percent in its first state election.

Collectively, the vote for other parties, such as the

Christian-based Family First and Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation Party, halved, to 7.6 percent. The vote for Bob Katter's KAP collapsed from 11.5 percent in the 2012 state election to 1.8 percent. However, Katter's country-based formation held the two seats it had in the old parliament.

As a result, KAP could hold the "balance of power" in the new parliament, together with independent Peter Wellington, a veteran MP from the Sunshine Coast hinterland. In 1989, Wellington's vote enabled former Labor Premier Peter Beattie to form a minority government.

Newman and the LNP conducted their election campaign on the slogan of making "strong choices," insisting that "difficult" decisions were needed to reduce the state's debt and restore its AAA credit rating, which it lost after the 2008 global financial crisis. Newman, a former military officer, endlessly used the word "strong" to describe his government.

Voters ousted the LNP despite a relentless drive by the Murdoch media, spearheaded by its Brisbane tabloid, the *Courier-Mail*, to promote Newman. In its final election-eve editorial on January 30, the newspaper warned that a protest vote against Newman and Abbott could produce the "complete disaster of the chaos and disorder of minority government." It insisted that Newman and the LNP presented "the only coherent and comprehensive plan for the future" to "keep Queensland on a fiscally responsible path."

If Labor is able to form another government, however, it will only deepen the assault on the working class conducted by the previous Labor government, and by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, at both state and federal levels.

During the campaign, Labor leader Palaszczuk attacked the Newman government from the right, accusing it of promising to spend too much money on the basis of asset sales. Labor's "fiscal strategy" vowed to eliminate state debt faster than the LNP by merging and restructuring electricity and other government enterprises and diverting their dividends from social spending into debt repayments.

This will mean axing thousands more jobs and further gutting health, education and other social services, which have already been decimated by state and federal governments. Palaszczuk has refused to rule out retrenchments, let alone restoring any of the jobs

scrapped by the LNP.

The severe social crisis already facing the working class was never mentioned during the official election campaign. Queensland, once touted as a "mining boom" state, has become one of the sharpest expressions of the downturn overtaking Australian capitalism. Official unemployment is around 20 percent in some Brisbane suburbs and a record number of Queensland homes—25,305—were disconnected from their electricity supplier in 2013-14 because they could not pay soaring power bills.

These conditions will worsen as global coal, iron ore and liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices continue to fall. Labor, like the LNP, premised all its election pledges on fraudulent claims that new LNG projects would miraculously reverse the state's economy, which shrank by almost 2 percent last year. Labor's meagre promises of a few hundred more nurses and teachers will soon be ditched.

Significantly, in her first speech on election night, Palaszczuk paid tribute to the trade union movement, which threw all its resources behind a "put the LNP last" campaign. This is a warning that the union apparatuses will work to isolate and suppress all resistance to Labor's pro-business program, just as they did under the LNP and previous Labor governments.



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