The international significance of the Australian election

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Coming in the wake of last week's vote for Britain to exit the European Union, the Australian federal election this Saturday is another sign of the political upheavals being fuelled by the worsening global economic breakdown, rising geo-political tensions and deepening social inequality in every country.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called a rare "double dissolution" election for all seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate in a bid to secure majorities in both houses and to press ahead with the agenda of militarism and austerity demanded in ruling circles. Eight weeks later, Turnbull's objective of full control of the parliament for his Liberal-National Coalition is the least likely outcome of Saturday's poll.

Such is the intense and widespread frustration and anger with both the Coalition and the opposition Labor Party that nothing can be ruled out, including a hung parliament in which neither party secures an absolute majority in the lower house. The most likely result in the Senate is that the Greens, minor parties and independents will continue to hold the balance of power and the ability to frustrate government legislation.

The uncertainty surrounding Saturday's election follows six years of acute political instability that has witnessed four changes of prime minister—three of them through inner-party coups. Kevin Rudd was ousted as Labor prime minister in 2010 by Julia Gillard. She was in turn overthrown by Rudd on the eve of the 2013 election, which the Labor Party lost decisively. Tony Abbott was removed by Turnbull as Liberal leader and prime minister less than a year ago.

Concerns that popular hostility is spilling outside normal political channels not only abound in the Australian press but are also being expressed in the international media.

The *Australian Financial Review* marshalled comments from CEOs for a front-page article calling for a stable government and warning voters "to avoid a Brexit-style vote for independent and fringe parties that could head to a hung parliament and hurt the economy for years." The global economic slump, particularly the slowdown in China, has hit the Australian economy hard, ending the protracted mining boom. This is provoking increasingly shrill demands from big business for accelerated "reforms"—that is, deep cuts to social spending, along with lower wages and more "flexible" working conditions.

A lengthy article in yesterday's *New York Times* entitled, "In Australian election, discontent is the front-runner," pointed out that Turnbull's "plan to win a stronger mandate has collided with forces not unlike the anger that prompted Britain's vote to leave the European Union and has fuelled populist movements on the Continent and in the United States. Australian voters hold the leaders of both establishment parties in disdain…"

The Brexit vote has far-reaching ramifications for the future of the European Union and of the United Kingdom itself, as well as for global geo-politics and capitalist economy more broadly. Political instability in Canberra, which is a key ally in the US "pivot to Asia" and military build-up against China, also has consequences. The US has already intervened via the 2010 Labor Party coup to oust Rudd—whose preference was for Washington to accommodate to Beijing—to ensure Australian support for the "pivot."

Six years later, the US provocations against China, especially in the South China Sea, have dramatically accelerated, as has the integration of the Australian military into the Pentagon's war plans against China. The entire political and media establishment has

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maintained a conspiracy of silence during the election campaign about the rising danger of war, fearing that any discussion or debate would trigger anti-war opposition and feed into existing public hostility over deteriorating living standards.

In Australia, as in Britain, the widespread alienation of voters from the major parties is the product of decades of far-reaching attacks on the jobs, conditions and living standards of working people. What was initiated in the UK by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was carried out in Australia by the Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating between 1983 and 1996, with the full collaboration of the trade unions. The onslaught was deepened by subsequent Coalition and Labor governments, particularly the minority Greens-backed Labor government of Gillard, which set new records in slashing public spending.

In his final election address to the National Press Club on Tuesday, Labor leader Shorten accused the Turnbull government of “creating the preconditions for disadvantage and inequality” This had led to “alienation, marginalisation, a search for more extreme solutions” of the kind that had rocked the US and UK in recent months. He drew a parallel between the One Nation party of Pauline Hanson and extreme right-wing organisations, such as the UK Independence Party and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump.

The huge and widening social gulf between rich and poor, for which the Labor Party bears heavy responsibility, has certainly been exploited by right-wing populist formations such as One Nation that seek to whip up racism and xenophobia, directed against immigrants and refugees in particular.

However, the same social crisis, combined with growing fears about war, is also fuelling a leftward movement of layers of workers and youth looking for progressive solutions. That has been expressed most graphically by the millions of young people who supported Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign in the US in the mistaken belief that he represented socialism. In Australia, the Greens, supported by various pseudo-left organisations like Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative, are trying to position themselves to steer the political radicalisation taking place into safe parliamentary waters.

Herein lies the significance of the campaign being conducted by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia which, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is fighting to build a unified movement of the international working class against war and austerity. The political volatility in the Australian election is another indication of the profound crisis of the global capitalist system, sharply expressed in the Brexit vote. Capitalism has nothing to offer humanity but social misery and the descent into a third world war. The only alternative is the struggle for socialist internationalism, for which the SEP and the ICFI alone fight.

To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.

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