

“Left” Greens faction formed in Australia amid growing discontent

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On December 22, an anonymous grouping within the Greens in New South Wales (NSW), Australia’s most populous state, announced via Facebook that it was forming a faction called “Left Renewal.” A “Statement of Principles” declares that it will “fight to bring about an end of capitalism.” Its membership application form asks: “Are you committed to organising around socialist politics within the Greens NSW and wider community?”

The motivation behind the faction’s formation is not the fight for socialism, but concern over the fall of support for the organisation, due to its open integration into the official political establishment. From 2010 to 2013, the Greens functioned as a de-facto coalition partner with the Gillard Labor government, propping it up as it slashed public spending and aligned Australia with the US military build-up in Asia against China. In the July 2, 2016 federal “double dissolution” election, Greens’ leader Richard Di Natale openly stated that the party’s ambition was to form a coalition government with Labor.

The result was that the Greens’ vote fell and it lost a seat in the parliamentary upper house, the Senate. It still holds just one seat in the 148-member lower house. The only areas where it came close to winning additional seats were inner-city, gentrified electorates inhabited by wealthier sections of the middle class.

For decades, former members of the Labor and Stalinist parties, who entered the Greens in the 1990s, along with pseudo-left tendencies such as Socialist Alliance, have devoted immense political resources into trying to portray it as a “left-wing” alternative. In reality, the Greens’ upper middle-class social base has propelled its trajectory, at both the national and state level, ever further to the right. Since the 2016 election, the Greens have signaled their willingness to work with

the conservative Coalition government of Prime Malcolm Turnbull, using their votes in the Senate to pass legislation that was being blocked by all other “oppositional” groupings.

Amid growing hostility to the staggering levels of social inequality in the country, the formation of Left Renewal is an attempt to sustain the fiction that the Greens have some “left-wing” or even “socialist” potential. Its founding statement notes that there has been “a revival” of interest in socialism around the world “in the form of Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, Iglesias’ Podemos [Spain] and others.”

The opportunist and somewhat pathetic character of the grouping is underscored by the fact that none of its founders will even name themselves, until they have seen what the reaction will be from the Greens’ hierarchy, the media and the various pseudo-left organisations.

Greens’ leader Richard Di Natale has responded with the loaded suggestion that the faction’s members leave the party. “Of course the Greens do not support the overthrow of capitalism or any other ridiculous notion of the sort,” he stated. “If the authors of this ill-thought through manifesto are so unhappy with Greens’ policies, perhaps they should consider finding a new political home.”

Former Greens’ leader Bob Brown likewise declared that the statement was “a litany of anti-Green policies” and that “no member of such a group could agree with the [Greens’] charter or remain a member of the Greens.”

Two Greens politicians came out this week, however, to publicly defend Left Renewal’s right to exist within the party: Senator Lee Rhiannon, who is considered the most “left” among Greens politicians, because she once belonged to the Stalinist Socialist Party of Australia,

and David Shoebridge, a member of the upper house of the NSW state parliament. The media had linked both of them to the faction from the outset, on the basis that some of their former staff and associates had identified themselves as “supporters.”

In a comment in the *Guardian* on January 11, Rhiannon and Shoebridge appealed to the Greens’ leadership to tolerate the faction on the grounds that it was making “a legitimate contribution to political debate in the party.”

Rhiannon and Shoebridge stressed that neither of them was a member of Left Renewal and emphasised that they did not endorse its call for the “end of capitalism.” They wrote, instead, that “there is an energy and creativity in capitalism that anyone can see and we support.” They have decided to openly defend the grouping, however, for the same reason that it was launched: to send a warning to the right-wing Greens leadership that, if at least a faction of the party fails to posture as anti-capitalist and socialist, it will be completely bypassed by the leftward movement that is already underway among significant layers of workers and youth.

So deep is the popular hostility to the political establishment that politicians on the extreme right of the Liberal Party have begun discussing the need to break away and establish a new formation that would fight divert social discontent into Trump-style anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism and demands for protectionist economic policies (see: “Political instability deepens as Liberal Party faces potential split”).

On the left, there is a vast vacuum. Millions of ordinary people are alienated from Labor and the trade unions, while growing numbers of workers and youth, outraged over social inequality, are becoming sympathetic to socialist ideas.

Internationally, growing anti-capitalist sentiment has recently been channeled behind politicians and organisations—such as Bernie Sanders in the United States, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece—which have consciously betrayed the hopes and aspirations of their supporters among socialist-minded workers and youth.

The objective of Left Renewal is to do likewise. It aims to divert the development of a genuine socialist movement in Australia away from the struggle against

capitalism and towards identity-based protest campaigns along with continued electoral support for the current political setup, via the Greens. Echoing the nostrums of the entire anti-Marxist identity politics milieu, its Statement of Principles declares that “authoritarian relations”—which it names as “elitism, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, religious sectarianism and ableism (among others)” —must be abolished before any movement can be built “capable of transforming society.”

The same statement insists, as a principle, that the factions’ members will “respect, implement and where necessary bind on the organisation’s democratic decisions”—that is, the decisions made by the right-wing and privileged upper middle class Greens’ membership.

Thus far, only a handful of Greens figures have identified themselves with the faction. These include Hall Greenland, a “left” radical from the 1960s, who eventually joined the Greens and Jim Casey, a former member of the International Socialist Organisation, who stood for the Greens in a Sydney seat in the 2016 election. All have a background in pseudo-left protest politics.



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