

Discontent and political volatility dominate Western Australian election

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A state election in Western Australia (WA) on March 11 could become a political disaster for the federal Liberal-National government, with media polls predicting likely defeat for the ruling Liberal Party of Premier Colin Barnett.

Conditions in the former mining boom state illustrate the economic and social reversal faced by many workers across the country since the boom started to unravel in 2012. In some suburbs of Perth, the state capital, official jobless rates exceed 20 percent and many more workers have been pushed into low-paid and casualised employment.

Over the past five years, WA has gone from being the fastest growing state to the most recessionary. The economy has shrunk almost 11 percent, led by a near-40 percent drop in business investment. Once heavily-dependent on iron ore royalties, the state budget has a \$3 billion annual deficit and, according to the state treasury, is heading for debt of \$41 billion.

The opposition Labor Party is committed to slashing spending to reduce the deficit and has failed to gain much ground. Bitter memories also remain of the last Labor government, from 2001 to 2008, which starved basic services of funds while using enormous mining royalties to cut taxes for the wealthy.

More fundamentally, the Labor Party at every level of Australian politics has functioned for decades as a ruthless instrument of big business, working with the unions to impose sweeping corporate restructuring and austerity measures.

Under these conditions, the WA election has become a testing ground for the aspirations of Senator Pauline Hanson's anti-immigrant One Nation party, assisted by prominent media promotion, to exploit the social discontent and political disaffection.

Hanson is trying to emulate US President Donald Trump, posturing as "anti-elite" outsider and adopting his

slogan of "drain the swamp." Like the American billionaire, she is seeking to divert widespread anger at the political establishment into reactionary nationalist and protectionist directions by witch-hunting Muslims and scapegoating overseas workers.

Hanson will spend the next week campaigning in WA. Currently polling at between 8 and 13 percent, her party hopes to win enough seats in the upper house to hold the "balance of power"—a Liberal or Labor government would need its votes to push legislation through parliament.

In a bid to survive, and to make a pitch in Hanson's extreme right-wing direction, the Liberal Party struck a preference vote swap deal with One Nation. The pact was not simply a WA initiative—the negotiations with One Nation involved key figures in the federal Coalition government, including Finance Minister Mathias Cormann.

There are indications, however, that the deal may have backfired, further haemorrhaging support for the Liberals. The agreement preferenced One Nation above the rural-based Nationals, who hold ministries in Barnett's government, exacerbating rifts in the national Liberal-National Coalition. The Nationals retaliated by directing preferences in some electorates to the Greens, endangering Liberal Party seats.

Barnett also outraged working people by vehemently supporting the recent federal Fair Work Commission ruling to slash the Sunday penalty wage rates on which many workers and young people depend to live. He called on the WA Industrial Relations Commission to match the decision for state-based awards, under which about 15 percent of West Australians are employed.

According to a February 3 Newspann, Barnett's satisfaction ratings remained the lowest ever recorded by a state leader at only 32 percent. Yet, the Labor Party has been unable to capitalise on the hostility because of its

own pro-business policies. Likewise, the support for the Greens, a pro-capitalist party appealing to well-off sections of the middle class, remained on just 9 percent support.

Cynically, Labor Party leader Mark McGowan, an ex-naval officer, is posturing as an opponent of the government's plans to sell-off a 51 percent stake in WA's electricity network, Western Power, a move that inevitably will eliminate thousands of jobs and push up household power prices. The Liberals hope to raise \$11 billion from the privatisation to meet the debt reduction demands of the financial markets, which stripped WA of its AAA credit rating in 2013.

Labor's stance is a fraud. Labor governments in other states have privatised electricity and other assets to satisfy the corporate elite, an offensive that was accelerated by the last federal Labor government from 2007 to 2013. Moreover, as McGowan told a gathering of business leaders last December, Labor intends to meet their budget-slashing demands by cutting public sector jobs and services.

McGowan unveiled a plan to reduce the number of senior public servants by 20 percent and introduce 20 new key performance indicators for government service delivery. He said Labor's policies represented "a revolution in how government is conducted."

Shadow treasurer Ben Wyatt recently said Labor had identified recurrent spending cuts worth about \$200 million, and would initiate a "service priority review" to target further savings. To reduce the state debt would "take years of consistent strong budgeting that WA Labor delivered under [former premier Geoff] Gallop."

Such cuts will deepen the assault on health, education, welfare and other social programs that began under the previous WA Labor governments, and which were then intensified by the Liberals once the mining tax revenues collapsed.

WA already has the country's worst public school student-teacher ratio—15.7. In 2013, the Barnett government eliminated about 500 teaching jobs and more than 400 education assistant positions. Labor has promised to restore only 120 teaching jobs and 300 education assistants and is being supported by the education unions, which were instrumental in blocking opposition to the job cuts.

In public hospital emergency departments, the percentage of patients waiting four hours or less dropped from around 80 percent to 75 percent between 2011–12 and 2015–16, far below the national target of 90 percent.

Since 2012–13, the number of social housing units has declined from 42,496 to 39,969, while the level of need has soared. According to welfare agencies, almost 10,000 people are now homeless in WA, and in 2016 one charity, St Vincent de Paul, turned away 17,000 requests for assistance.

In the state's north, mining towns have been decimated by job losses and property price collapses, forcing many residents to leave. Thousands of workers who once worked on mining projects, often on a fly-in, fly-out basis, generating super-profits for the mining conglomerates, have been thrown on the scrapheap.

Perth's suburbs have some of the worst unemployment rates nationally: to the south Armadale 18.0 percent and Mandurah 23.8 percent, to the north: Balga-Mirrabooka 22.0 percent and Girrawheen 21.5 percent.

Hanson falsely claims to represent the interests of ordinary working people. She has professed to oppose the electricity privatisation, while calling for further cuts to government spending. One Nation has already assisted the federal Coalition government to push through welfare cutbacks.

Above all, Hanson has sought to split the working class, fomenting divisive, anti-Muslim sentiment. One Nation's nationalist and protectionist policies also echo the efforts of the trade unions to divert workers' discontent down anti-Chinese and anti-foreign worker channels.

Hanson denounces welfare recipients, effectively blaming unemployed youth and workers, as well as foreign workers, for the relentless destruction of jobs and conditions by Australian corporations.

No matter which party heads the next WA government, with or without One Nation's help, the assault on the working class will intensify. As the *West Australian* reported last month, Barnett and McGowan "have been put on notice by WA Treasury that the state's finances are in crisis, with debt and deficit blowing out."



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