

Rifts widen in the Australian Greens

James Cogan
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Factional conflicts within the Australian Greens have intensified over the past several days, with tensions growing between the national organisation and the New South Wales (NSW) state branch.

The dispute's immediate trigger was Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon's alignment with the opposition Labor Party and the teacher trade unions against school funding legislation proposed by the federal Liberal-National Coalition government. Rhiannon, the party's only federal senator from NSW, claimed she was obliged by state branch policy to take the stance she did.

Her intervention, however, stymied moves by the Greens parliamentary leadership to negotiate a deal with the government to pass its bill through the Senate—the upper house of the Australian parliament. Unable to rely on the Greens' votes, the Coalition passed the education measures with the assistance of other “third party” senators.

The majority of the 10-member Greens' parliamentary group, headed by leader Richard Di Natale, reacted with fury to being sidelined from negotiations on key legislation. In an unprecedented action, they banned Rhiannon from party-room discussions on “contentious” topics. They said she would be excluded until the NSW branch repudiates its constitutional stipulation that parliamentary representatives adhere to the decisions of the state-based party.

Underlying the divisions is the fact that the Greens have evolved over the past two decades into the party of “green” business. While it appeals for support on the basis of environmental and identity politics issues that concern sections of the middle class and a layer of youth, its primary objective is to develop and advocate policies that benefit its corporate backers.

The 2016 election underscored the Greens' class character. Di Natale openly called for a Labor-Greens

coalition. The party's highest votes were in the wealthiest inner-city electorates of Sydney and Melbourne, including once-safe Liberal Party seats. In working-class electorates, its vote did not rise above single-figure percentages.

While the Greens made no gains, the election saw an unprecedented number of “third parties” win Senate seats. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Coalition government held office with only a one-seat majority in the lower house. It now has just 29 of 76 seats in the Senate, leaving it relying on either the Greens or other “cross-bench” senators to pass any legislation that Labor opposes.

Di Natale and the Greens' majority have since sent out the signal that they intend to be a “responsible party,” prepared to compromise and strike deals with the government of the day.

As well as Di Natale, other parliamentary Greens personify this perspective. The party's treasury spokesman, Peter Whish-Wilson, is a millionaire ex-investment banker who has called for the elimination of workers' weekend penalty wages. Senator Nick McKim is a former advertising executive who, as education minister in a Labor-Green coalition government in the state of Tasmania, sought to impose budget cuts that would have closed dozens of public schools.

The majority's orientation has encountered open opposition from a NSW party faction centred around Rhiannon, a figure with longstanding relations with the trade unions and the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance. This faction's concern is that the right-wing trajectory of the Greens will further discredit the organisation when there are clear signs of a shift to the left among broad sections of the working class and youth.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's “Insiders” program last Sunday, Rhiannon declared she was “disappointed” in Di Natale's leadership. She stated: “You look around the

world at the moment, mass movements are on the rise around the world ... there is a change in how politics works ... it is many people who see capitalism isn't working." She continued: "I don't think there is anything wrong with young members who join the party who want to talk about socialism."

Rhiannon was referring to a Greens grouping formed late last year called "Left Renewal," which declared it would advocate "anti-capitalist" and "socialist" policies. While Rhiannon does not formally belong to the faction, there is little doubt she has influence within it.

Rhiannon proceeded to hail the example of Jeremy Corbyn, who won the British Labour Party leadership in 2015 against a vicious right-wing campaign by appealing to widespread hostility to the militarist and pro-business policies associated with Tony Blair and his successors.

Rhiannon also lauds Bernie Sanders in the US. She is due to address a public forum in Sydney next month on Sanders and "Democratic and ecological socialism in the US." Posting the event to her Facebook page, Rhiannon asked: "How did a democratic socialist become the most popular politician in the United States?"

The differences over orientation are coming to a head with Rhiannon's suspension. The NSW Greens executive has condemned the ban on her and denounced the national leadership's demands for constitutional changes as "unconstitutional." The tensions could result in a formal split and the establishment of a new self-styled "left" formation.

Rhiannon's repeated invocations of Corbyn and Sanders shows in advance that the real character of such an organisation would be pro-capitalist and hostile to the interests of the working class.

In Britain, Corbyn has betrayed the promises he has made to his supporters. He has capitulated to the Labour Party right wing on issues such as continuing Britain's nuclear weapons program, participating in the US-led war in Syria and supporting austerity policies.

In the US, Sanders won 13 million votes in the Democratic Party primaries for the 2016 US presidential election by denouncing his rival Hillary Clinton and the Wall Street banks, and calling for a "political revolution." He proceeded to endorse Clinton—the favoured candidate of the corporate elite

and the military-intelligence apparatus. Since the election, Sanders has declared support for the nationalist and protectionist economic policies of Donald Trump.

Rhiannon has previously lauded the Syriza-led government in Greece, which won office in 2015 with false promises it would end budget austerity. Within months—as was entirely predictable given its pro-capitalist program—Syriza utterly betrayed the Greek working class and has imposed far deeper cuts to social spending than the parties it replaced.

Rhiannon's own political history testifies to the thoroughly conformist and bourgeois character of her perspective, and that of those who support her. She comfortably served in the de-facto Labor-Green coalition from 2010 to 2013, during which time the Greens assisted the minority Gillard Labor government to introduce reactionary policies aimed at privatising health and disability services and attacking tertiary education and welfare.

Most significantly, the Greens collaborated with Labor's alignment of Australia with the US "pivot to Asia" against China in 2011. Over the years since, this alignment has resulted in a massive increase in military spending at the expense of social services and the expansion of American military basing arrangements in the country.

Behind all its left and democratic posturing, the Rhiannon wing of the Greens is an Australian expression of the international efforts to prevent—however temporarily—the development of a genuine socialist movement against the political establishment and the capitalist system it defends.



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