

Early Queensland election points to political instability in Australia

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Queensland state Labor Party Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk last Sunday called an election for November 25, sending voters to the polls several months early, with an election campaign to last less than four weeks. The decision has clear national implications, and provides an insight into the underlying social and political crisis across the country.

Via the snap election, the Labor Party in Queensland and nationally is seeking to capitalise on the disarray of the Liberal-National Coalition federal government in the wake of last week's High Court ruling disqualifying National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce and four other MPs. While the supreme court did so on the reactionary nationalist basis that the five MPs technically held dual citizenships, the verdict has also exacerbated the fragility of the one-seat majority Coalition government.

The election could signal a new stage in the decay of the two-party system that has prevailed in Australia since World War II.

After three years of pro-business and "law and order" policies to boost police powers, Palaszczuk's government has opened the door for the extreme right-wing, anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson's One Nation party to possibly win enough seats to hold the so-called balance of power in the next Queensland parliament.

Such a development could boost One Nation's capacity nationally to exploit the acute distress in working class and regional areas of the country. Like Trump and similar outfits in Europe and New Zealand, Hanson's party specialises in diverting discontent over falling wages, unemployment and under-employment in xenophobic and divisive directions. It seeks to scapegoat refugees, migrants and "foreigners," especially from China and Middle East for the social inequality and problems caused of by the capitalist

profit system.

Media polls in Queensland indicate support for both traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Liberal National Party (LNP), is at near-record lows—with Labor on 35 percent and the LNP on 34 percent. One Nation is polling up to 16 percent, which may translate into holding 6 to 12 seats in the 93-member legislative assembly. One Nation's support is concentrated in the most impoverished parts of the state, where polls indicate its vote could hit 30 percent.

In effect, One Nation, a rabidly nationalist formation, could determine which party forms the next state government. That is, either Labor or the LNP could form a de facto coalition with One Nation, although both are currently ruling out a formal partnership with it.

Typifying Labor's commitment to meeting the needs of the corporate elite, Palaszczuk, a long-time party functionary, opened Labor's election campaign on Sunday by saying she called the poll "to give business and industry in our great state the certainty they need."

Labor's backing for big business has included offering lucrative royalty rebates—yet to be publicly quantified—to the proposed Adani coal mine in central Queensland. If the \$20 billion open-cut mine proceeds, scientists have warned that it could endanger regional underground water supplies and the Great Barrier Reef.

Last Saturday, Palaszczuk underlined Labor's other main policy—bolstering the police apparatus to deal with social unrest—by announcing another 400-person increase in police numbers. She boasted that this was in addition to the more than 300 officers the government had added since 2015, taking the total police numbers to 11,800 full-time equivalent officers, with a record budget of \$2.37 billion for 2017-18.

Together with other state Labor premiers, Palaszczuk

this month joined hands with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's federal Coalition government to agree to an extraordinary increase in police powers. Under the guise of dealing with terrorism, the provisions further develop a police-state apparatus for suppressing opposition to the bipartisan program of austerity and war preparations. The measures include "real-time" use of facial recognition technology to monitor the population, 14-day police detention without charge, including for children as young as 10, and expanded powers to call out the military to deal with domestic unrest.

Parliamentary government in Queensland, the third most populous state, has become increasingly unstable since the 2008 global financial crisis.

For the past three years, Palaszczuk has headed a minority government, propped up by various independents and ex-Labor MPs. In 2015 Labor clawed its way back into office on the back of an electoral landslide against the widely-hated LNP government of Premier Campbell Newman. Newman and his treasurer, Tim Nicholls, who is now state LNP leader, had made a frontal assault on health, education and other public services, axing 14,000 public sector jobs.

Labor also benefited from the widespread hostility to the federal Coalition government, then headed by Tony Abbott, particularly over its plans for upfront charges to see doctors, higher tertiary education fees and the scrapping of penalty wage rates.

Just three years' earlier, in 2012, Labor was thrown out of office after two decades in power under premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh. Labor had responded to the 2008 economic meltdown, which ended the state's AAA credit rating, by privatising \$15 billion worth of more public services, on top of the electricity grid, at the expense of thousands of workers' jobs. In recognition of her political services, Bligh was this year appointed CEO of the Australian Bankers' Association, representing the interests of the big banks. Palaszczuk was a leading minister in Bligh's government.

Labor's years in office, both before and after 2012-15, have left a trail of devastation in working class areas. Even on under-stated official figures, unemployment remains stuck at near 20 percent in the southern and western suburbs of Brisbane, the state capital. This is almost four times the national and state average of less than 6 percent.

Official unemployment is also in double-digit figures in regional centres such as Ipswich, parts of the Gold Coast, Townsville, Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg, Gladstone and Mount Morgan, especially where workers have been severely affected by the sharp downturn in mining and smelting industries since 2011.

Almost as many workers are "under-employed"—trying to find more work—and youth unemployment rates are up to double the overall level. In the northern city of Townsville, for example, the youth joblessness rate is estimated at 22 percent.

In a cynical bid to head off rising anger over soaring living costs, and to cover Labor's tracks on electricity privatisation, Palaszczuk last week promised to give households a \$50-a-year rebate on their power bills for two years. This is of little assistance to working class families, whose annual average bills now run to around \$700 a year, and with another \$140 rise predicted.

Australian Energy Regulator figures showed a 55 percent leap in the number of households in Queensland that had their power cut off in the three months to March. With more than 18,000 disconnections in the first nine months of 2016-17, the total is set to top the previous year's 21,667.

Whichever government is formed after November 25, it will be under intense pressure from the financial markets to step up the slashing of social spending in order to further drive down workers' wages and conditions, cut business taxes and lift profits. Because of the ongoing slump in mining and related industries, financial media outlets are warning that total state debt is forecast to rise to \$81 billion in 2020-21.

Yet the trade unions, which all backed Beattie and Bligh, joined by the pseudo-left groups, are urging voters to elect yet another anti-working class Labor government.



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