

Queensland election highlights political crisis across Australia

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Tomorrow's election in the northern state of Queensland has become a concentrated expression of the breakdown of the long-standing two-party parliamentary system, as well as of the deeper political impasse confronting the working class in Australia and internationally.

Various media polls point to both traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Liberal National Party (LNP), struggling to push their respective votes over 30 percent, opening the door for the extreme right-wing One Nation to possibly pick up enough seats to enter government for the first time anywhere in Australia.

One Nation is cynically exploiting the public disgust toward the political establishment, falsely depicting its pro-business agenda as “anti-elite,” while trying to divert social and political disaffection in poisonous nationalist and anti-Asian and anti-Islamic directions.

The election outcome could reverberate across the country, potentially accelerating the collapse of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's Liberal-National government. More fundamentally, the crisis poses the necessity for the working class to break out of the political straitjacket of the Labor Party and the trade unions and turn to an alternative socialist perspective.

The LNP is openly prepared to enter a coalition with One Nation, an avowedly anti-immigrant and xenophobic party. Labor has insisted it will not do a deal with One Nation, warning that would create “instability.” But Labor MPs are publicly cosying up to Senator Pauline Hanson's party, sharing its rabid nationalism.

The seething hostility to the two “major” parties is the product of decades of mounting attacks on the jobs, living standards and basic services of the working class to satisfy the dictates of the financial elite. This corporate offensive has been imposed by one government after another, both Labor and LNP, and enforced by the trade unions, which have smothered every outbreak of

opposition by workers.

Years of bitter experiences have demonstrated the political dead-end confronting millions of working people across Australia's third most populous state. Over the past decade, in particular, the 2008 global financial meltdown and the subsequent implosion of the mining boom that propped up the state economy have produced mass unemployment—up to 20 percent officially—and social misery in working class and regional areas.

This economic and social breakdown has produced unprecedented political fluctuations. Five years ago, in 2012, the two decade-old Queensland Labor government of premiers Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh was thrown out of office in a landslide that reduced Labor to a parliamentary rump of just seven seats.

Just three months after the 2009 state election, Bligh had repudiated her electioneering promises to defend, not cut, public services. She announced a \$15 billion sell-off of public enterprises, axing thousands of railway and other jobs.

Explicitly backed by the then federal Labor government, Bligh declared that her decision was essential to restore the state's AAA-credit rating on the global financial markets after the 2008 crash.

The trade unions proceeded to suffocate the opposition of rail and other workers, paving the way for the election of a LNP government. For her services, Bligh was well rewarded—she is now the CEO and public face of the Australian Bankers Association, directly representing the interests of the financial oligarchy.

The incoming LNP government, led by Premier Campbell Newman, set about slashing healthcare and other essential social services, axing 14,000 public sector jobs, in an effort to appease the financial markets and attract rapacious investors. That assault allowed Labor to scrape back into office in 2015, with Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk heading a precarious minority government.

Over the past three years, Labor has refused to restore the services gutted by the LNP. Nor has it been able to reverse the economic decline, despite offering huge subsidies to corporate operators, including royalty rebates, infrastructure funding and other concessions worth an estimated \$500 million over the next five years for the Adani company's proposed coal mine in central Queensland.

Instead, hand-in hand with its desperate pro-business measures, the Labor government has undertaken a law-and-order offensive, boosting police numbers, resources and powers to deal with anticipated social unrest. Palaszczuk also joined her state counterparts and Turnbull's government in introducing police-state provisions, such as extended detention without charge, under the guise of combatting terrorism.

Labor's main pitch to voters has been to play upon fears of another LNP government, headed by Tim Nicholls, who was the Newman government's treasurer and personally championed its mass job destruction. Labor's main election advertising slogan warns of "cuts and chaos" under a LNP-One Nation coalition.

Beneath the sloganeering, Palaszczuk's essential appeal has been to business leaders to back Labor as a more reliable instrument for inflicting their requirements. At Labor's official campaign launch last Sunday, she insisted the election was "a choice between certainty and uncertainty, a choice between stability and instability."

Cynically, the trade unions are doing everything they can to corral their members behind yet another corporate-dominated Labor government. Their election slogans, such as "It'll be grim under Tim [Nicholls]," are designed to block any examination of Labor's record, especially under Bligh. Palaszczuk was a key minister—the transport minister—in Bligh's hated government.

The Greens are playing a parallel role. While trying to win an inner-Brisbane seat from Labor, by appealing to upper middle-class voters in gentrified suburbs, they are essentially backing Labor's retention of office. Likewise, the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance is running a candidate in a central Brisbane electorate to provide a safety valve for discontent, but allocating its preferences to the Greens and Labor.

All the most critical political issues facing working class and young people have been buried throughout the campaign. Behind a wall of phony election promises, both Labor and the LNP have avoided any discussion about their commitments to the financial markets to reduce the state's ballooning public debt. There is a conspiracy of

silence about the reality—as soon as the election is out of the way, the next government will intensify the assault on the jobs, conditions and basic services of the working class.

Above all, there is no mention of the escalating danger of a catastrophic war, triggered by Washington's aggression against North Korea and China, with both Labor and the Coalition pledging unconditional involvement in any US military operation.

One Nation, which also backs US militarism, has no solutions to the social distress it is capitalising on. Its program mainly rests on promoting the profit interests of national-based business operators who are being squeezed by the big banks and transnational corporations. The poorest and most vulnerable members of society would be the primary victims of its anti-welfare and divisive policies.

Polling has shown that only about 13 percent of intending One Nation voters are motivated by its policies, whereas 45 percent are simply determined to "shake things up" or dislike the old parties. One Nation is also wracked by its own rifts, with its latest federal Senate nominee, Fraser Anning, splitting from the party before he was even sworn into office last week.

This right-wing formation is only able to feed off the political alienation because the working class remains sidelined and suppressed by Labor and the unions, which have been at the forefront of enforcing the social devastation. Alongside similar experiences in Europe and internationally, this demonstrates the urgent necessity for a conscious political turn to the only progressive alternative: a socialist and internationalist program.



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