

Australia: Widespread discontent overshadows Tasmanian state election

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Tasmanians are due to vote on March 3 in the first of a series of state elections this year that will underscore the intensifying disaffection with the long-established parties of rule in Australia. The island state of Tasmania, although the smallest, with a population of about 520,000, has become one of the sharpest expressions of the political impasse facing the entire working class.

At the last state election in March 2014, echoing the federal Rudd-Gillard Labor government's landslide defeat six months earlier, the Labor Party's primary vote plunged to 27 percent—an historic low. The Greens, who had formed a coalition government with Labor in the state for four years, fared even worse, losing a third of their vote, which dropped to 13.5 percent. Businessman Clive Palmer's Palmer United Party (PUP), which had won a federal Senate seat in Tasmania in 2013 by peddling right-wing populism, did not win a single state seat.

Labor's 16 years in office from 1998 left the working class suffering Australia's highest level of unemployment—officially 7.4 percent—and the deepest public spending cuts per capita, involving hundreds of job losses, school closures and public health cutbacks.

From 2010 to 2014, Greens state leader Nick McKim, since installed as a federal Greens senator, was a key minister in a minority state Labor government. As education minister he showed the Greens' true class colours, provoking public outrage by leading a drive to shut down public schools in order to satisfy the demands of the financial markets for deep budget cuts.

As a consequence, the Liberal Party picked up 15 of the 25 seats in the state parliament's lower house, allowing it to form a government in its own right for the first time since 1996. Labor and the Greens were decimated: the Greens lost two of their five seats, and

Labor lost three of its 10.

Four years on, the situation confronting the working class continues to worsen. Although the official jobless rate has dropped to 5.9 percent, that is due to a fall in the participation rate and the replacement of full-time jobs with lower-paid part-time and casual employment. More than 4,500 full-time jobs have disappeared in the past 10 months alone.

Poverty levels remain the worst in the country, with estimates that in 2016 nearly 75,000 people, or more than 14 percent, were living in poverty. In that year, the average Tasmanian household income was \$43,600, which was 32 percent below the national average.

Entrepreneurs, including "Green" industry proprietors, have touted growth in property development, tourism and hospitality, but manufacturing industry has continued to be wound down. In 2015, the US mining equipment giant Caterpillar announced the elimination of another 280 jobs in Burnie, on the north coast. The Liberal government axed 1,200 public sector jobs, in addition to 1,000 job losses announced by the previous Labor-Green government. In total, these retrenchments cut the public sector workforce by nearly 10 percent.

Such is the discontent that media polls suggest another hung parliament is likely, with neither the Liberals, led by Premier Will Hodgman, nor Labor, headed by a recently-installed leader, Rebecca White, likely to secure the 13 seats required for a majority in the House of Assembly. Aware of the discrediting of the Greens, who previously propped up a minority Liberal government from 1996 to 1998, both Hodgman and White have ruled out governing in minority, but such pledges have been broken in the past.

Hodgman, the son and grandson of Liberal Party politicians, personifies the drive by the ruling

establishment to slash social spending in order to make the working class keep paying for the deteriorating economic situation. In August 2016, global credit ratings agency Moody's cut the state's ranking to Aa2, predicting widening budget deficits. Hodgman responded by vowing to do more to cut the deficit.

In launching his party's campaign, Hodgman pledged multi-million dollar increases in health spending over the six years, matching Labor's equally cynical promises. At the same time, the Liberals have mounted a "law and order" campaign to further boost police numbers and powers, and declared they will reintroduce draconian anti-protest laws to prevent demonstrators from disrupting business activity. The High Court ruled the original legislation unconstitutional.

Labor made White its leader in March last year in an attempt to put on a fresh face. But she typifies Labor Party careerism, serving as a parliamentary staff advisor or member of parliament since her graduation from university in 2004.

At Labor's official campaign launch last weekend, flanked by federal Labor leader Bill Shorten, White sought to win votes by promising to relieve the chronic underfunding of hospitals, abolish government school fees and remove poker machines from hotels and clubs by 2023 to stem the heavy losses incurred on the machines by impoverished households.

Unions Tasmania, the state's peak trade union body, and its affiliates are pouring resources into campaigning for Labor. They are again promoting illusions that a Labor government will be less vicious than the Liberals, but the record of the previous Labor governments speaks otherwise.

Likewise, the Greens are promising to "champion integrity, decency and fairness." They remain handicapped, however, by the record of state party leader Cassy O'Connor. She was minister for Human Services, Community Development, Climate Change and Aboriginal Affairs in Labor's cabinets from 2011 until 2014.

At the beginning of the election campaign, media polls and pundits promoted the prospect that another right-wing populist outfit, the Jacqui Lambie Network (JLN), could win several seats, enabling it to determine who formed the next government. Lambie, the network's creator, initially won a federal Senate seat in Tasmania in 2013 as a PUP candidate before breaking

with Palmer without any clear political differences.

Lambie, an ex-soldier and military police officer, espouses xenophobic, bigoted and authoritarian views as a means of diverting the discontent over job losses, falling living standards and budget cuts in reactionary directions. Her policies include barring foreign workers, banning Islamic headwear, blocking Chinese investment, restoring the death penalty and cutting off welfare payments. Among her main proposals are compulsory national service and greater military spending, effectively aligning with the US-led preparations for war.

Polls now predict that Lambie's JLN will fail to win any seats. It has been hit by defections and ructions, underlining the instability and opportunist character of such formations.

This month, Lambie expelled Devonport mayor Steve Martin from JLN after he was sworn into the federal Senate to replace her. She had been forced to quit the Senate late last year, after discovering she was a dual citizen, as part of the ongoing witch hunt against members of parliament lacking "sole loyalty" to Australia. Martin refused to stand aside to let her resume her seat. Lambie has now vowed to stand for the Senate at the next opportunity, ruling out standing as a candidate in the state election.

Reactionary formations such as Palmer's and Lambie's have been able to emerge and posture as defenders of working people only as a result of the endless betrayals carried out by the Labor Party and the unions, which have enforced declining working and living conditions since the Hawke-Keating federal Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

This highlights the political crisis confronting working people. The offensive demanded by the financial and corporate elite is deepening, as is the danger of war, despite immense public hostility. The hostility and disgust must be translated into a conscious struggle for a socialist program to totally reorganise economic life on the basis of human need, not the insatiable profit appetites of the wealthy.



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