

Australian Labor Party helps disintegrating government impose repressive laws

Mike Head**1 December 2018**

During the current final two-week parliamentary session for 2018, Australia's Labor Party opposition is sending clear signals to the ruling class of its readiness to form a repressive government under conditions of economic downturn, mounting popular discontent and a US-led drive for war against China.

Labor is working hand-in-glove with the visibly disintegrating Liberal-National Coalition government to push through a series of draconian laws, including to cut off welfare benefits for new immigrants and to hand sweeping new powers to the military-intelligence-police apparatus.

Wracked by a worsening right-wing-driven factional split, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government barely survived a House of Representatives procedural motion on Thursday that could have triggered a no-confidence vote. Four independents abstained, and some MPs were absent, giving the government a 68 to 66 margin.

Reduced to a minority government through by-election defeats and defections, the Coalition is desperately manoeuvring to retain office until a general election, which must be called by May 18. It has virtually shut down parliament, which will sit for just 10 days next year before a re-scheduled early federal budget on April 2.

On Thursday, Labor won revealing praise from Senator Pauline Hanson, who heads the far-right, anti-immigrant One Nation party. She hailed it for giving the government the votes needed to pass a bill to make new immigrants wait four years—double the current period—before being eligible for unemployment benefits. Designed to slash \$1.3 billion off welfare spending over four years, the bill is a foretaste of the austerity and immigrant-demonising measures to come.

Less publicity has been given to five police-state

measures that Labor is backing to (1) allow the government to call out the military to put down domestic unrest, (2) crack open encryption codes, (3) fast-track a new “foreign interference” register, (4) strip citizenship from anyone convicted of even a minor terrorism-related offence and (5) permit Australia's foreign spies to kill people.

These bills are unprecedented, except for the draconian powers adopted to suppress dissent during both world wars. They are part of a barrage of measures in preparation to combat mounting public hostility to the entire political establishment under deteriorating economic and social conditions and the growing danger of frontline Australian involvement in catastrophic US wars, including against China.

* With Labor's unwavering support, the government pushed the expanded military call-out powers through the Senate on Tuesday. “Authorising” government ministers can now issue call-out orders if they decide there is a “threat” of undefined “domestic violence,” even if the relevant state or territory government objects. Military personnel will have unprecedented peacetime powers, including to use lethal force, detain civilians, erect blockades, issue directives, search people and premises and seize property.

* Defying widespread opposition, Labor is likewise seeking to help pass the government's bill to empower the police, Border Force and intelligence agencies to compulsorily crack open encryption and other privacy devices. All 21 listed agencies also will be able to covertly access people's computers, a power currently reserved for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic political spy force.

Labor's legal affairs spokesman, Mark Dreyfus, this week publicly proposed to split the bill to immediately hand the police and intelligence agencies encryption-

cracking powers, claiming that they must deal with unspecified terrorist threats during the Christmas-New Year holiday period.

Labor's plan was unveiled after the federal police and intelligence chiefs gave a four-hour "top secret" briefing to the parliamentary security and intelligence committee. Earlier, Prime Minister Morrison insisted that the bill must be fast-tracked because "the police and agencies need these powers now."

* Labor signed off on the government's acceleration of the "foreign influence" register, which will now commence on December 10, months earlier than expected. On the unsubstantiated pretext of protecting the coming federal election from Russian and Chinese "interference," a political party, business or individual that allegedly cooperates with any "foreign" group or government—including international organisations—will be compelled to register with the Attorney-General's Department, which will hand the information over to the intelligence and prosecution agencies.

Under amendments rushed into parliament this week, members of organisations will face lengthy jail terms for failing to register within three months, or just 14 days once the writs for an election are issued. In addition, any information published on the register, which may include sensitive details such as names and addresses, will now remain public indefinitely, even if a group is no longer required to register.

* Further legislation is being fast-tracked to extend the government's power, first created in 2015, to strip citizenship and all associated basic rights from dual Australian citizens convicted of terrorism-related or other designated offences, including treason and "foreign incursion" into proscribed parts of the world. The law currently applies to people convicted of an offence with a sentence of six years or more in prison.

The new provisions will apply regardless of whether a person is actually entitled to citizenship in another country. The home affairs minister simply has to be "satisfied" that the person is a "national" of another state. Ramping up the government's nationalist propaganda against "violent radical Islam," Morrison declared this week that "extremists" would be deported, regardless of their status. If no other country would take them, they would be detained indefinitely.

* In another abrupt move, Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) spies will be authorised to

use lethal force on wider grounds, including to prevent their cover being blown while carrying out missions overseas. The foreign minister also can "approve" the use of such force "in the course of specified activities undertaken by ASIS outside Australia." Currently, ASIS agents can legally kill people in supposed self-defence or to protect "a person" cooperating with ASIS.

Announcing the shift, Foreign Minister Marise Payne declared: "Our ASIS officers often work in dangerous locations, including under warlike conditions, to protect Australia and our interests. As the world becomes more complex, the overseas operating environment for ASIS also becomes more complex."

Payne's reference to "warlike conditions" has a wider significance. Preparations are being made for US-led wars. In yet another hysterical scare campaign, both the government and Labor, assisted by the corporate media, are depicting Australia as under siege from terrorists, immigrants and the Chinese Communist Party regime.

Coming on top of about 100 packages of legislation since 2001 to boost the powers and resources of the security forces, these laws constitute an historic assault on fundamental democratic rights, including freedom of speech and association.

The capitalist establishment, in which the Labor Party has always played a central role, especially during wars and political crises, is lurching toward more authoritarian forms of rule, bolstering the state apparatus for definite reactionary purposes.

The ruling elite is preparing to suppress rising social and political discontent amid worsening economic conditions, escalating social inequality and the mounting danger of war. At the same time, it is seeking to divert this disaffection in poisonous nationalist directions, particularly directed against China.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact