

Australian mining magnate renews his fraudulent populist pitch

Mike Head: SEP candidate for Oxley
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For the May 18 Australian election, a plethora of right-wing populists is seeking to cynically exploit the immense popular hostility toward all the establishment parties—Liberal-National Coalition, Labor and Greens—that have presided over deteriorating working and living conditions for decades.

In the working class Brisbane electorate of Oxley, where I am standing for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), three such formations are making a pitch to the workers, unemployed and small business people who have been the victims of the relentless economic restructuring in favour of the tiny financial elite.

While feigning sympathy for working people, these outfits are alarmed by the resurgence of working class struggles globally and the growing support for socialism, especially among young people. All of them are peddling nationalist, xenophobic and anti-Chinese poison that pits workers in Australia against their fellow workers in Asia and internationally, and diverts them from the real cause of the social devastation—the capitalist profit system itself.

Senator Pauline Hanson's One Nation is a vicious exponent of anti-Asian, anti-Muslim and anti-welfare scare-mongering. Fraser Anning's Conservative National Party openly demands an end to immigration and a return to the racist "White Australia" policy.

The most cashed up of these formations is the recently-registered United Australia Party (UAP), bankrolled by Clive Palmer, an iron ore and coal billionaire. Estimated by *Forbes* magazine to be worth \$1.8 billion, he is spending up to \$80 million to stand candidates in every lower house seat. Palmer is bombarding the population with TV ads, radio spots, YouTube videos, billboards, letterbox drops and unsolicited text messages, proclaiming "Put Australia First!"

Emulating Donald Trump—a similar incarnation of personal and corporate greed—Palmer's constant twitter feed features demagogic slogans like "Drain the swamp!" "Make Australia Great Again" and "end the Labor-Liberal duopoly."

The UAP's ads feature bogus anti-establishment rhetoric, such as giving a "fair go" to "families torn apart by the banks." They speak of "mass youth unemployment," "poverty," "homelessness," "congested cities," "abandoned factories" and "devastated rural communities."

But Palmer has no solutions to these immense social problems because he is an out-and-out supporter of the profit system that has created them. The SEP is the only party telling the truth in this election: capitalism cannot be reformed to deliver a "fair go."

We say to workers and youth: don't be duped again!

Palmer made similar promises during both the 2013 and 2016 elections. His Palmer United Party (PUP) once held the balance of power in the Senate, only to back the Liberal-National government in pushing through plans to slash taxes for business and the wealthy. PUP disintegrated acrimoniously and lost all its seats at the 2016 election.

Palmer's contempt for workers was made absolutely clear at Townville's nickel smelter. After initially handing out cars and other productivity bonuses when he acquired the plant in 2009, his Queensland Nickel company went into liquidation in 2016, leaving 800 workers owed more than \$70 million in wages and entitlements. None of this has been paid still, despite Palmer's recent promises to do so.

Once again, Palmer, who lives a world apart from working class people—full of luxury cars, exclusive resorts and expensive real estate—is posturing as their friend. This is a total fraud. His wealth, and that of his

fellow billionaires, is gouged out of the workers they exploit and then discard.

Despite Palmer's claims to present an alternative to the "duopoly," he lines up completely with them on both economic and foreign policy. In fact, both the Coalition and Labor have sought preferential vote-swapping deals with the UAP, seeing it as a potential government partner in the Senate. Ultimately, Palmer signed up with the Coalition.

The UAP's program entails radical free-market restructuring in the interests of the ruling elite. Behind Palmer's talk of "boosting our wealth and economy for all our citizens" he wants to go even further in cutting taxes for big business and the rich.

This includes abolishing the Fringe Benefits Tax and business provisional taxes. Under the guise of helping rural residents, Palmer promises a 20 percent regional tax concession that would overwhelmingly benefit mining companies like his own.

These policies would, in fact, intensify the corporate assault on jobs, working conditions, living standards and basic services that has been enforced by the very political establishment he claims to oppose.

Even the name of the UAP is revealing. It claims the heritage of the party of the same title that was formed in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, to bring together Joseph Lyons, a Labor Party leader, and Robert Menzies, a leader of the conservative Nationalist Party, to impose on the working class the terrible mass unemployment and wage cuts demanded by the international banks.

Palmer is also fully committed to the US ruling class's drive toward a confrontation with China, which places Australia's population on the front line of a potential nuclear war.

UAP social media promotes a threat issued by the Trump administration's recently-arrived US ambassador to Australia, Arthur Culvahouse, accusing China of being "inappropriately aggressive" and warning that he would "pressure test" the US-Australia alliance to see if it had any weaknesses.

This is combined with virulent anti-Chinese propaganda. UAP videos depict a Chinese grab for control over key Australian assets. "Both parties selling off ports, electricity and other infrastructure," they declare. "Stop the sale! Give them a thong slap." The racism of the message is barely disguised.

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

The SEP calls on youth and workers looking for a progressive way forward: Support and join our party. Take up the fight for a genuine socialist alternative—to unify the working class globally to overturn the financial and corporate oligarchy, establish a workers' government and totally reorganise economic life on the basis of human need, not the insatiable profit appetites of the super-rich.

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