As Australian Labor Party embraces big business, Greens plead for new partnership

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Australian Greens leader Richard Di Natale last week issued a public appeal to the Labor Party to work with his party on climate change policy and election campaigning, in order to "defeat the Coalition."

Via an interview with Nine Media newspapers, Senator Di Natale telegraphed the Greens' aspiration to form a coalition government with Labor, or at least a de facto coalition administration as the party did when it propped up the minority Gillard Labor government from 2010 to 2013.

Asked about Labor's view that it did not need the Greens to form government, the Greens leader replied: "That's clearly the assessment they've made. I think it's the wrong assessment."

Di Natale revealed that he had "consistently tried to reach out to Labor to try and establish a constructive working relationship," but had been rebuffed under both former Labor leader Bill Shorten and Shorten's successor, Anthony Albanese.

This marks a deepening of previous efforts by the Greens, who rest on an upper middle class constituency, to enter coalition governments with Labor. Their aim is to bolster the political establishment after a decade of instability, mounting popular discontent and unprecedented political disaffection with the entire parliamentary order.

The Greens have held cabinet posts in a coalition government with the Labor Party in the Australian Capital Territory, based in Canberra, since 2012, just as they did in the state of Tasmania from 2010 to 2014, where Nick McKim, now a federal senator, tried to enforce a vicious school closure program.

Like their counterparts in Germany, who took key posts in Social Democrat administrations from 1998 to 2005, the Australian Greens have played a pivotal role in the political establishment for decades. They first shared power in the 1989–92 Labor-Green Accord in Tasmania, and maintained a similar partnership with a Tasmanian Liberal government from 1996 to 1998.

Di Natale's latest plea came seven months after Labor's debacle at the May 18 federal election, where its vote plunged to a new 100-year low of 33 percent, despite widespread hostility toward the Liberal-National Coalition government. The sharpest falls occurring in working class electorates across the country, while Labor's vote rose to record levels in some of the wealthiest areas, as did that for the Greens.

Millions of workers and young people did not believe Labor's phony efforts to appeal to rising discontent by promising to deliver a "fair go" against the "big end of town." This is the result of decades of bitter experiences with Labor governments and trade unions imposing the dictates of the corporate elite at the expense of jobs, working conditions and living standards—leading to glaring social inequality.

Nor were the Greens seen as any progressive alternative, but rather as a party of the inner-city, upper-middle class. Across the country, the Greens vote stagnated at just above 10 percent, even though the votes for both Labor and the Coalition fell.

In response to its devastating defeat, Labor installed Albanese unopposed as leader to spearhead a further lurch to the right. He immediately pledged to work more closely with business and support "wealth creation." Albanese then used three "vision" speeches to vow to deliver the next wave of corporate restructuring, invoking the heritage of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, which worked closely with the unions to enforce the requirements of global capital.

As part of Albanese's pitch to big business, earlier this month he backed the continued export of

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coal—Australian capitalism's second largest source of revenue—despite the mounting evidence of the devastating impacts of climate change. To "immediately stop exporting coal would damage our economy," he stated, taking an almost identical line to that of the Coalition government.

Desperate to win corporate backing, Labor is expected to also ditch its election pledge to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent by 2030, based on 2005 levels, and adopt the government's ineffectual target of 26 to 28 percent, which has allowed Australia's emissions to continue rising.

Labor's post-election review sought to blame the party's "ambiguous language" on backing the Adani company's proposed giant new open-cut coal mine in central Queensland, "combined with some anti-coal rhetoric," for the collapse of Labor's vote in the coal-mining areas of Queensland and the Hunter Valley of New South Wales. But the losses in those electorates were just the sharpest expression of the wider breakup of Labor's support in working class areas, including across western Sydney.

Despite Albanese's pronouncement, Di Natale said he was keen for the two parties to be "co-operative" during election campaigns. He gave the example of the inner-Melbourne seat of Higgins—one of the most affluent in the country. Both Labor and the Greens aimed to win the seat at the May election but the Liberal Party retained it. The focus on electorates like Higgins typifies the social base of both Labor and the Greens.

Di Natale is not the only Greens leader pursuing hopes of holding office in partnership with Labor. McKim, who held multiple portfolios, including prisons and education, in the Tasmanian Labor-Greens government, recently extolled the record of the Greens-backed Gillard government. "Let's not forget Julia Gillard, who with the Greens delivered world-leading climate legislation in 2012," he tweeted.

Far from leading the world in halting global warming, the Gillard government's carbon tax was a pro-business measure that would have meant Australia's carbon emissions rising from 582 million tonnes to 621 million tonnes by 2020. That government also signed up to the US confrontation with China, including through the stationing of US marines in Darwin, and fully backed the US persecution of journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Domestically, it privatised disability services, undermined public education through NAPLAN standardised testing, and stripped parenting payments from tens of thousands of single mothers.

Since Di Natale's appeal, not a voice of dissent has been heard from within the Greens, including from the self-styled "progressive" faction of the party in New South Wales, previously headed by former Senator Lee Rhiannon.

This wing of the party has focused on identity politics and condemnation of the persecution of refugees, trying to win support among students and layers of the inner-Sydney middle-class. Its only concern is that the openly right-wing politics of Di Natale and the federal leadership will mean that the Greens can make no appeal to the developing political radicalisation of workers and young people and will be unable to channel opposition back behind the parliamentary establishment.

The alignment behind Labor exemplifies the right-wing trajectory of the Greens. While they previously appealed to young people, largely on the basis of concerns about the environment and war, the Greens rest on a well-heeled layer that is preoccupied with lifestyle and identity issues, while enforcing job and service cuts against the working class.

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