

Membership-rigging exposes Australian Labor Party's rot

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Revelations this week of “industrial-scale” branch stacking inside the Australian Labor Party (ALP) have shone a light on the advanced decay of this party, which has been the central political instrument of the ruling establishment for over a century.

A near year-long investigation by the Nine Entertainment’s TV and newspaper outlets, involving secret cameras and recordings, exposed a key ALP powerbroker in the state of Victoria, Adem Somyurek, and his staff members enrolling and paying for bulk party memberships.

The recordings show Somyurek ordering others to forge signatures and create false statements claiming that people paid for their own memberships. Reportedly, up to 4,000 of the ALP’s claimed 16,000 members in the state of Victoria have been registered this way.

Moreover, “everyone” in the ALP leadership knew that this was going on, despite the feigned shock of Victorian state Premier Daniel Andrews and federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese.

Nor was this simply a Victorian state issue. On the basis of his known membership-rigging, Somyurek had risen to become a member of the ALP’s highest body, its 21-person national executive.

In damage control, Andrews quickly sacked Somyurek as a state government cabinet minister. Two other ministers closely associated with Somyurek resigned in rapid fashion. Somyurek was even expelled from the ALP. However, all three remain in parliament.

In an attempt to stem the resulting fallout, the ALP national executive convened an emergency meeting on Tuesday to take control of the entire Victorian branch for three years, and halted the voting rights of all members, including for the pre-selections of all Victoria’s federal and state members of parliament.

Massive falsification and inflation of party membership numbers is hardly new in the ALP, however. Nearly 20 years ago, a report by former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke and ex-New South Wales (NSW) Premier Neville Wran described it as a “cancer” eating away at the party.

In NSW, the most populous state, the ALP has become synonymous with control by trade union-backed powerbrokers like Eddie Obeid, who was later jailed for misusing his ministerial power for financial gain.

Yet the branch stacking has only gotten worse, assisted by the fact that the ALP’s actual membership has continued to collapse. Nationally, it has less than 50,000 members, even counting those fraudulently enlisted by Somyurek and his ilk, who control party branches in every state and territory.

Moreover, the party suffered a historic debacle at last year’s federal election, showing the further disintegration of its electoral base. Its vote fell to a near-century low of around 33 percent, allowing the discredited Liberal-National government to cling to office despite losing votes itself.

The resulting shockwaves and factional brawling within the discredited Labor and union bureaucracy may have sparked Nine Entertainment’s spying and entrapment operation, which reportedly began soon after the election.

For decades, the ALP has been a rotted-out shell, with virtually no real working class members, just apparatchiks, parliamentarians, staffers, union officials and careerists. Local branch stacking has long been the means by which factional powerbrokers and allied trade union bureaucrats have controlled pre-selections for parliamentary seats and access to key staff jobs and other lucrative posts.

Similar methods are used to inflate union memberships, which also have shrunk, in order to give union leaders faction-aligned voting blocs at ALP conferences.

Nevertheless, the sheer size of the latest activities points to an even deeper crisis. Somyurek claimed to control two-thirds of the Victorian ALP through fake and real members, whom he shuffled around party branches as needed to secure votes, party posts and pre-selections.

Somyurek specialised in stacking branches with people recruited by ethnic business and community figures. In the taped conversations he directed his operatives, using vulgar and disparaging language, to “put in” bulk numbers of “Indians” and “Somalis” to stack branches controlled by “Anglo” members. “We can put 1000 [Indians] in, they’re

all fully f---ing resourced,” he said in one recording.

Somyurek regarded the 20-something Labor staffers placed in his branch-stacking operations with equal contempt. Behind their backs, he described them as “slimy,” “patronising and annoying” and “little passive-aggressive f---ing gay kids.” The recordings are also replete with misogynistic comments about female Labor ministers.

Notably, Somyurek’s power base was an alliance formed in 2018 between right-wing factions and trade unions, such as the shop assistants union, and an “Industrial Left” grouping of supposedly militant unions, such as the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU).

Somyurek’s ruthless and anti-democratic methods epitomise those that all these formations employ, riding roughshod over any concern for the interests of the working class.

Like numerous Labor leaders before him, Albanese declared: “We will take whatever action is necessary to make sure that we have fair and clean operations of politics.” But an internal ALP review, to be headed by ex-Victorian Premier Steve Bracks and former deputy federal leader Jenny Macklin, is designed to cover up the party’s underlying putrefaction, just like the one conducted by Hawke and Wran.

At this point, the exact motivations behind the Nine Entertainment exposures remain unclear. One thing is clear, however. It has been a highly-orchestrated and extensive sting operation. The *Age* and “60 Minutes,” the two outlets that published the material, said they had obtained more than 100 audio and video surveillance files. Phone calls were recorded and footage of Somyurek and his associates was shot in various locations, including offices, car parks, and bank ATMS.

One of the unanswered questions is the use of the electoral office of federal Labor MP Anthony Byrne to record many of the incriminating conversations and activities. Byrne, who was once closely aligned with Somyurek, has refused to comment, as has Albanese.

However, Albanese praised Byrne for doing an “outstanding job” as deputy chair of the parliamentary intelligence and security committee. Byrne and the chair of that committee, Liberal MP Andrew Hastie, have many connections with the military-intelligence apparatus and especially with its US partners.

Somyurek evidently saw his factional coalition as a key protector of Albanese, who was installed as leader after last year’s election disaster. “I’m having discussions with people who are close to Albo,” he boasted on one tape. He told one Labor staffer: “Who’s going to protect Albo?”

Albanese, a member of Labor’s “Left” faction, is a proven

defender of the US military alliance. But both Labor’s deputy leader Richard Marles and ex-leader Bill Shorten are regarded as being more unconditionally committed to the alignment behind Washington’s increasingly aggressive confrontation with China, despite its dire implications for the export-dependent Australian economy.

In one form or another, the agenda behind the revelations is driven by the requirements of the financial elite. Nine Entertainment, which last year took over the former Fairfax newspaper, radio and other outlets, is a sprawling media conglomerate. As are most publicly-listed Australian companies, it is controlled by institutional investors, notably HSBC, JP Morgan and Citicorp.

A major concern in these ruling circles, after more than a decade of political instability in which no prime minister has lasted three years, is to fashion a political instrument capable of fully imposing the assault they demand on working class jobs and conditions—an offensive now being intensified as a result of the economic crisis triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The Liberal-National Coalition’s membership also has shrunk and it has been wracked by branch stacking and other forms of factional infighting for years. As a result of this, and decades of declining living and working conditions and worsening social inequality, public confidence in these twin formations of capitalist rule has fallen to all-time lows. A post-election survey last year found that only 12 percent of voters thought the government is run for “all the people.”



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