

# Queensland state election underscores political instability in Australia

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The election in Queensland on October 31 is taking place amid the worst economic and social disaster since the 1930s Great Depression. Such is the level of political disaffection that the first state election in Australia since the onset of COVID-19 raises the possibility of a minority government.

Polls have indicated a virtual tie in primary votes between the five-year-old Labor Party government and the opposition Liberal National Party (LNP). Various minority parties are vying to exploit the discontent fuelled by Labor's decades of betrayals nationally, as well as in Queensland, where Labor has been in office for most of the past 30 years.

These formations include the Greens, seeking the support of upper middle class layers in inner-city Brisbane, the state capital, and far-right populist outfits, such as the anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, mining magnate Clive Palmer's United Australia Party and the rural-based Katter's Australian Party.

Labor suffered a devastating defeat at the May 2019 federal election, with its vote falling to the lowest level in a century. Some of the worst losses occurred in Queensland. For good reason, workers had no faith in Labor's fraudulent pledges of giving them a "fair go."

Labor has since shown signs of fracturing, with the sudden resignation of three state ministers just weeks before this month's election, including two in key "swing seat" electorates.

The uncertainty of the election is not due to substantial differences in policy between Labor, led by Anastacia Palaszczuk, or the LNP led by Deb Frecklington. None of the social problems confronting workers and youth have been addressed by the campaigns of any party.

Labor is trying to hold onto office by focussing on its

record of closing the state's borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is cynically exploiting the legitimate concerns of working class people about the "reopening" drive of big business.

Palaszczuk is trying to follow the example of the Ardern Labour Party government in New Zealand, which won that country's election last Saturday by adopting a similar line. Like Ardern, Palaszczuk is making few promises, in order to keep imposing the burden of the mass unemployment and poverty onto the working class.

Labor is reassuring the corporate elite that a government it leads will continue to meet all the requirements of big business. Already, as first instalments, the Palaszczuk government has frozen the wages of the state's public sector workers, including nurses and teachers, approved new coal mine projects and ended a six-month moratorium on residential evictions.

This is part of a wider political shift. Confronted with a massive economic downturn, all the parliamentary parties are sharply turning to the right and further committing to intensify austerity and deepen attacks on workers to pay for the enormous corporate and financial bailouts handed out by state and federal governments.

Palaszczuk's government has come under increasing pressure from the federal Liberal-National government and big business over its border closures. As part of the drive to "re-open the economy," Prime Minister Scott Morrison has campaigned for Frecklington's victory. This is in line with the criminal "herd immunity" policy of allowing the virus to spread, being pursued by governments around the world.

Labor substantially eased lockdown restrictions in June, when the danger of further outbreaks was still

significant. It only belatedly reinstated some measures after the resurgence of the virus in Melbourne in July, fearful of the political consequences and opposition by workers to allowing the virus to run unhindered.

Despite the remaining restrictions, Brisbane is this weekend hosting the Australian Rules Football grand final, which will be played in front of a crowd of some 30,000 spectators, in an event that clearly poses the risk of transmission if anyone in attendance is COVID positive.

Crucially, no efforts have been made to increase public hospital infrastructure, or access to medical services, with only a pittance of additional funding made available for additional testing.

Labor has for decades pursued an agenda of support for big businesses indistinguishable in substance from its ostensible LNP opponents. The Labor and union leaders have suppressed any discussion about the previous state Labor government, in which Palaszczuk was the key transport minister. Led by Anna Bligh, that administration was defeated in a landslide in 2012 after privatising railways and other services and destroying thousands of jobs.

In a cynical bid to posture as a defender of jobs, Palaszczuk has now promised to buy back and reopen some of the railway facilities that Labor sold off.

Labor clawed its way back into office in 2015 on the back of widespread hostility toward the LNP government of Campbell Newman, who became the first premier to lose his own parliamentary seat in 100 years. Having taken power as a result of Labor's attacks on the working class, Newman's government sacked 14,000 public sector workers, demolished social services, and had sold-off another \$37 billion of public infrastructure.

The Palaszczuk government has not substantially reversed any of the cuts imposed by Newman. In some cases it has deepened them. In addition, Labor has dramatically eroded democratic rights, by expanding the police and enacting draconian laws curtailing the right to protest.

Workers in Queensland, just as internationally, face a social catastrophe. Nationally, the true rate of unemployment and under-employment is roughly 23 percent, with Queensland having among the highest rates. Even before the pandemic, Palaszczuk's own seat of Inala had an official unemployment rate of 18.5

percent in March.

Well before the pandemic, major working-class areas of Ipswich, Logan and the Gold Coast had half of Australia's 20 most housing-distressed areas, with high numbers paying 35 percent or more of their income on rent. While the temporary provision of federal JobKeeper wage subsidies and higher JobSeeker benefits, and bank mortgage waivers, has so far prevented financial ruin for many, these measures are being rescinded in order to force workers into low-paid employment.

In line with the corporate bailouts nationally, Labor has handed out money for large businesses and financial institutions, including a multi-billion dollar royalty deferral for Adani's Carmichael coal mine.

Likewise, Labor suspended public hearings into the disaster at the Grosvenor coal mine in central Queensland, which severely injured five miners. Labor fears the exposure of poor safety standards, which are a direct product of government and corporate profit considerations.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, it will produce a right-wing government in the service of the financial elite. The disaffection in the working class has yet to find conscious expression in the building of a mass socialist party, but that task is now posed like never before.



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