

Australia: Queensland Labor holds office by exploiting pandemic concerns

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Last Saturday's election in the Australian state of Queensland has seen the return of the Labor Party government of Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk for a third term, substantially on the back of Labor's spurious claim to have protected the population from the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic via border controls.

Labor largely portrayed the election as a virtual referendum on its border closure policy, running on a premise of "keeping Queenslanders safe" while attacking the opposition Liberal National Party (LNP) for pushing to re-open the borders as soon as possible.

With two-thirds of the votes counted, Labor has obtained a vote of about 40.5 percent, enough to secure 49 to 52 of the 93 seats in the state parliament, and allowing it to form a majority government.

The swing to Labor of nearly 5 percent on its 2017 state election result was a blow to the LNP, which aligned itself with the conservative federal Liberal-National government. Prime Minister Scott Morrison spent a week in the state, from October 10 to 14, joining big business in railing against the border restrictions.

The LNP, led by Deb Frecklington, actually gained 2 percent on its primary vote from 2017, but nevertheless sustained a rout, losing at least five seats. Its attempts to whip up fears of "youth crime" in the state's north—implicitly demonising indigenous youth—backfired, allowing Labor to retain all its seats in the regional centres of Townsville and Cairns.

The defeat has fuelled bitter infighting in the LNP. Frecklington initially declared on Saturday night she would remain party leader, but suddenly quit today after it became clear that the knives were out for her.

Labor also picked up seats long held by the LNP in the relatively affluent tourism and retirement areas of the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast, despite intensive anti-border control campaigns by LNP and business leaders.

Labor's higher vote mostly came from the collapse of support for the far-right, anti-immigrant One Nation. Its leader Senator Pauline Hanson echoed US President Donald

Trump in claiming that deaths from COVID-19 had been exaggerated, and compared its severity to the seasonal flu, which has a mortality rate 30 times lower than COVID. One Nation's primary vote was slashed in half to 7 percent.

Having retained office, Labor will now turn to unveiling austerity measures to make the working class pay for the worst economic breakdown since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Throughout the election campaign, Labor said virtually nothing about its plans to deal with the crash, with workers across the state already suffering the country's highest rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Only in the final days of the campaign, after many people had already voted via pre-polling or mail-in ballots, did Labor reveal its plan to extract \$1 billion in "efficiency savings" from Queensland Health over the next four years—further cutting the service responsible for managing any COVID outbreak.

This is a warning of the austerity measures to come in the state budget, which Labor cynically delayed until after the election. The budget, most likely to be handed down in December, will outline further plans to slash spending in order to reduce the state public debt, which will hit a record \$102 billion next year.

In her victory speech on Saturday night, Palaszczuk gave another early indication of Labor's backing for the "reopening" drive of the corporate elite, which is likely to include the removal of border controls. "This has been a tough year and we've got to get people back into work," she said.

Labor also exploited Frecklington's record as a minister in the 2012-15 LNP government of Premier Campbell Newman, which was ousted after sacking 14,000 public sector workers and selling off \$37 billion in public assets. But Labor was silent on Palaszczuk's record as a minister in the previous Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh, which suffered a landslide defeat after similarly privatising railways and other utilities and destroying thousands of workers' jobs.

The Greens gained a second seat in parliament—on the back of LNP second preferences—in the inner-city electorate of South Brisbane, yet its statewide primary vote fell by 1 percent. The Greens only targeted upper middle class electorates, reflecting the party's social base.

Before the election, Greens state leader Mike Berkman, who held the previously LNP-controlled Brisbane seat of Maiwar, made clear overtures for a coalition with Labor, as did federal Greens leader Adam Bandt. Their hopes were dashed, however, when Labor won enough seats to rule by itself.

Like One Nation, two other right-wing populist formations—the rural-based Katter Australian Party and the United Australia Party, funded and run by mining mogul Clive Palmer—failed to gain any traction. The Katter party, which called for immigration cuts and protested against pandemic restrictions in regional areas, held onto three outback seats, but lost a bid to win more and join a coalition government. Palmer spent millions of dollars on saturation advertising, railing against the border controls, yet gained only 0.6 percent of the vote.

The election result bears certain similarities to the recent elections in New Zealand, as well as the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, which returned Labor-led governments that focused their campaigns almost entirely on their supposed successes in containing the pandemic.

Working people have witnessed the catastrophe confronting the populations of the US and Europe, as a direct result of the corporate drive to prematurely herd workers back into workplaces in order to generate profits.

Polls taken in Queensland showed broad majorities for maintaining border restrictions, with young people aged under 35 the most supportive, despite bogus claims that COVID was only dangerous to the elderly.

Yet, as in New Zealand, or the US, where Joe Biden and the Democrats are presented as a lesser evil to Trump, Queensland Labor has no fundamental differences with its LNP opponents. Confronted with COVID, it only imposed lockdown measures out of fear that its under-equipped public health service, run down by decades of budget cuts, would be overwhelmed, triggering popular outrage.

Labor also calculated that preventing further outbreaks in Queensland would allow a more rapid return to work and schools, without improving healthcare infrastructure, testing, or providing adequate protections for workers and children. Queensland's hospital workers remain among the most poorly equipped in the country, in terms of personal protective equipment.

"You can't have an economy if you can't control the virus," Anastacia Palaszczuk declared at a victory press

conference on Sunday. "When you go into lockdown, there is no economy."

After the first wave of COVID in Australia peaked in April-May, Labor sought to re-open Queensland's borders in July, despite ongoing infection clusters in Melbourne and Sydney. It retreated from this measure belatedly, when the Victorian Labor government of Daniel Andrews lost control of outbreaks and was compelled to implement its own lockdown.

Furthermore, Queensland's border closures and quarantines for international travelers have been rife with pro-business breaches, including allowing the Australian Football League to play most of its season in the state.

Even before the election, Labor had already responded to the dictates of big business by imposing a two-year public sector wage freeze, assisted by the trade unions. It ended a six-month moratorium on residential rental evictions and granted a \$270 million tax deferral to mining giant Adani for its Carmichael coal mine.

Anticipating social unrest ahead, Labor also announced the biggest increase in police funding in 30 years—\$624 million over five years to hire another 2,025 officers.

In her victory speech, Palaszczuk thanked the previous LNP and One Nation supporters who voted for Labor, giving another indication of Labor's right-wing pitch. Despite her appeal for statewide "unity," it is clear that Queensland Labor, speaking for the ruling elite as a whole, is anxiously preparing for social convulsions.

Labor will now occupy office for another four years, so that it will have governed the state for most of the time since 1989, despite suffering a landslide defeat in 2012 because of its anti-working class record.

Far from restoring the jobs and wages of workers, Labor will act in line with the demands of the financial elite it serves, including by lifting border controls. To fight for both their safety and conditions of life, workers need to turn to building a new socialist leadership.



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