

Australian Labor Party shifts further to the right following by-election drubbing

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Bitter in-fighting is wracking the Australian Labor Party and its associated trade union apparatuses in the wake of the party's disastrous result in a state by-election on May 22 that revealed the further collapse of their support in working-class areas.

Two particularly right-wing party apparatchiks, Chris Minns and Michael Daley, are currently vying to replace another member of Labor's Right faction, Jodie McKay, as Labor's New South Wales (NSW) state leader after party powerbrokers ultimately forced her to resign several days after the result.

Labor received just 21 percent of primary votes, down 7.3 percent in three years, in the NSW electorate of Upper Hunter. That allowed the unstable Liberal-National Coalition government in the country's most populous state to hold the seat and cling to office despite lacking a parliamentary majority.

Although the Upper Hunter is a mixed rural electorate, with some affluent layers, Labor's vote plunged most in working-class mining-related towns, such as Singleton, where it fell from almost 40 percent to less than 25 percent.

The dramatic loss of working-class support was not simply a local phenomenon or confined to mineworkers. The debacle mirrored that of the May 1 Tasmanian state election, where a Liberal Party government suffered an electoral swing against it for the second election in a row, but survived because Labor's vote plunged to just 28.4 percent, a near-record low.

These results are deepening the trend seen in the 2019 federal election, when Labor's vote fell to just 33.3 percent, the lowest level in 85 years, permitting Prime Minister Scott Morrison's widely detested Coalition government to remain in power. In 2019 too, the decline in Labor's vote was sharpest in working-class areas hit by deteriorating employment and social conditions.

This electoral collapse has continued despite Labor's

recent state election wins in Western Australia and Queensland, which were based on cynically posturing as opponents of the Morrison government's most bellicose demands for economic reopening amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Labor's latest failure in Upper Hunter was even more telling because its candidate, Jeff Drayton, who was billed as a local coal miner, was in fact a full-time official of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining Energy Union (CFMMEU). For decades, the CFMMEU, like every other trade union, has worked closely with the employers, presiding over the destruction of workers' jobs and conditions, including the imposition of continuous 12-hour shifts in coal mines.

Amid the ongoing political shockwaves, immense pressure is being applied by Labor's federal and state party machines and union faction bosses to prevail on Daley to quit the leadership contest, so as to prevent the party's dwindling membership from taking part in a ballot that would take several weeks to finalise.

Whatever the outcome, the new leader will shift Labor even further to the right, toward a more explicit bipartisan partnership with the state and federal Coalition governments in response to the pandemic and the accompanying corporate offensive against workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Minns, the Right faction's former Labor state assistant secretary, is campaigning in the media for the job by pledging to work "positively," rather than criticise the Liberal-National state government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian. Interviewed by the Murdoch media's Sky News, he declared: "Whether you're on the government's side or the opposition's side, we are all on team New South Wales as we try and get through this horrible disease."

For months, Berejiklian, together with Morrison, has aggressively pushed the financial elite's demands for the

lifting of all pandemic safety restrictions, regardless of the global surge of more virulent and dangerous COVID-19 mutations, in order to boost corporate profit-making.

Minns has the evident support of the Murdoch outlets. *Australian* senior writer and columnist Troy Bramston yesterday declared Minns to be “the only credible leader for NSW Labor,” which Bramston described as “a snake pit of competing ambitions, simmering hatreds and festering recriminations.”

Minns, 41, is a typical life-long Labor hack, having been a party official or parliamentary staff member for years, but according to Bramston he is the best hope of uniting and putting a new face on Labor, “rather than being a negative and carping opposition.”

Daley, also from the Right faction, is an ex-party leader who was earlier a senior minister in the state’s last corruption scandal-plagued Labor governments of Premiers Nathan Rees and Kristina Keneally before Labor was swept from office by an election landslide in 2011.

Daley led Labor to defeat at the 2019 state election after a video emerged of him inciting hostility toward Asian immigrants. Daley said: “Our young children will flee and who are they being replaced with? They are being replaced by young people from typically Asia with PhDs. So there’s a transformation happening in Sydney now where our kids are moving out and foreigners are moving in and taking their jobs.”

Daley’s remarks were fully in line with the putrid nationalism and xenophobia peddled by the trade unions that control the numbers in the Labor Party. His offence was to be caught on tape making such explicit anti-Asian statements in order to scapegoat immigrant workers for the accelerating corporate attacks on jobs and conditions.

Having seen the media backing for Minns, senior federal and state Labor MPs have started taking to the airwaves to publicly endorse him. They are hoping to avoid a weeks-long ballot that would only further expose the rot of the party’s membership, which mostly consists of members of parliament and their staffers, party and union officials, and party career aspirants.

Among those speaking out are federal shadow assistant treasurer Stephen Jones and former state deputy leader Penny Sharpe, a leading member of Labor’s nominal Left faction. “I hope there isn’t a contest,” Jones told Sky News on Monday. “This is something the Labor Party doesn’t need.”

Some of the acrimonious brawling inside the Labor Party came into public view following the Upper Hunter result, when Minns and Labor’s state treasury spokesman

Walt Secord resigned from Labor’s shadow state cabinet after accusing the Labor leadership of circulating a “dirt file” against Minns.

A file titled “Why Chris Minns and Jamie Clements can never run the NSW Labor Party” was spread from the office of deputy state Labor leader Yasmin Catley, who later resigned alongside McKay. Clements, a factional ally of Minns, was the former Labor state general secretary who resigned in 2016 amid allegations of sexual harassment and raising donations from a billionaire Chinese property developer.

After the 2019 federal defeat, Labor installed Anthony Albanese as its national leader in order to execute an explicit pro-business shift. He abandoned Labor’s phony election rhetoric about ensuring a “fair go for all” and vowed to appeal to “successful people,” that is, the wealthiest layers of society. Minns has pledged to take the same course.

Throughout the pandemic, Labor nationally has shored up Morrison’s shaky Coalition government, providing “constructive” backing for its multi-billion dollar subsidies for big business and its allocation of \$575 billion for military spending to prepare to participate in a US war against China. Labor’s state and territory government leaders joined the federal government’s bipartisan “National Cabinet,” which has presided over the gross vaccination and quarantine failures, as part of the subordination of public health and safety to corporate profit interests.

But Labor’s electoral and political crisis is more fundamental. It reflects decades of being transformed into the most ruthless enforcer of the dictates of the corporate elite in partnership with the union apparatuses, especially since the Hawke and Keating federal Labor governments of 1983 to 1996 and their succession of Accords with the unions.



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