Australian Labor Party backs bills to de-register most political parties

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In a nakedly anti-democratic and self-serving move, the Labor Party's parliamentary caucus this week agreed to assist the Liberal-National Coalition government push four far-reaching electoral bills through parliament with breakneck speed.

As a result of Labor's complicity, the bills could be rammed through both houses of parliament and become law within days. In fact, the three main bills were rushed through the House of Representatives yesterday.

There has been virtually no public discussion or media coverage on this historic attack, unveiled suddenly last week on the eve of the next federal election, which is due by May next year.

The bills contain a host of measures to suppress alternative political parties and the basic rights of voters. Neither the Morrison government nor Labor has offered any explanation as to why these bills have been brought forward now, seemingly out of the blue.

But the reason is clear. These bills have been tabled amid the worsening global COVID-19 pandemic, which is producing an immense public health and political crisis in Australia and internationally, now accelerated by the Delta variant. Public support for all the governments responsible for failing to protect the population from this disaster is collapsing "off a cliff," as an opinion survey reported last week.

This crisis is wracking the entire political order. The underlying fracturing has only intensified since the last election in 2019, in which Labor's vote fell to a near-record low, allowing the Coalition to barely cling to office. Due to defections, Prime Minister Scott Morrison no longer has a working majority in parliament, and the prospect looms of another "hung" parliament, with neither the Coalition nor Labor holding a majority.

The most sweeping provision in the bills seeks to strip party registration from every party not currently represented in parliament. It would compel parties to provide lists and details of 1,500 members—triple the existing requirement—within three months of the laws passing, all in the middle of widespread lockdowns.

Without party registration, federal election candidates for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and 35 other currently registered parties would be prevented from having their names and thus identifying their political affiliations on ballot papers. Their candidates would have to stand without any party name, or as undifferentiated and unexplained "independents."

This represents a direct attack on the basic democratic rights of all political parties. It also violates the essential right of voters to know the political identities and programs of candidates. In particular, it robs them of the ability to cast a conscious vote against the capitalist ruling elite and for the SEP's socialist policies.

Labor's backing confirms that this is a bipartisan assault on the rights of the population, especially the working class, to organise politically and contest elections to challenge the increasingly discredited and loathed corporate and political establishment. As the *Australian Financial Review* stated approvingly yesterday, Coalition and Labor "will team up to change Australia's electoral laws."

The SEP has unequivocally condemned these bills and called for a powerful campaign on social media and throughout the working class against them. At the same time, we are appealing to all our supporters and readers to join the SEP to help us defeat this assault.

The Coalition and Labor claim that the new 1,500-member rule is now necessary to demonstrate that a party has a "genuine base of community support." That makes a mockery of elections themselves—their purpose is meant to be to gauge the level of voters' support!

Predictably, the existing parliamentary parties would continue to be exempt from any membership requirement whatsoever. They could well have difficulty nominating

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1,500 members, unless they could count MPs, staffers, trade union officials and other office holders.

In addition to the drive to deregister most political parties, the bills:

• Ban parties from using certain names, including "socialist" or "communist," as well as "labor," "liberal," or "green," if a registered party has already claimed that label. That could affect the SEP, as well as other parties, such as the breakaway New Liberals and Liberal Democratic Party.

• Severely restrict voting rights by limiting periods for pre-poll voting to a maximum of 12 days before elections.

• Increase jail terms to a draconian three years for the criminal offence of "interference with political liberty," which could now be constituted simply by supposed "obscene or discriminatory abuse" or just "harassment."

• Lower the election expenditure threshold from $500,000 to $100,000 for a non-registered party or group to register as a "political campaigner," thus having to file detailed financial records.

• Give the Electoral Commissioner the power to classify someone as a "designated elector" who can only cast a "declaration" (provisional) vote that is subject to subsequent vetting, supposedly to prevent them casting multiple votes.

Each of these measures is designed to curtail voting rights, shore up the disintegrating base of support for the major parliamentary parties, and give them a monopoly over the parliamentary system. There is no evidence of significant multiple voting or for the need of any of the other provisions.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and courts can already rule whether a party's name can be confused with another party, or implies a false association. The AEC has stated previously that no party can "own" a common political name.

The truth is that new parties have emerged primarily to appeal to the growing numbers of voters who are disgusted by the old parties. Trust in the major political parties fell to an all-time low even before the COVID crisis, with a 2018 survey showing only 16 percent of respondents trusted them.

Revealingly, Labor and the Coalition reportedly expressed concern about "misuse" of pre-poll voting after the May 2019 federal election, claiming that longer periods for voting ahead of election day distorted their campaigns and required more "manpower" at polling stations.

In 2019, a record 4.76 million voters chose to cast early votes and another 1.5 million sent postal votes—over 40 percent of registered voters in total. That is not "misuse" of the electoral legislation, which allows early voting when people are set to be away from their home electorate on polling day, if they are at work or have religious or medical reasons.

Rather, it is an expression of people's wish to be able to vote in a considered manner, without waiting in long lines on polling day, and without being subjected to the endless advertising and propaganda of the corporate-financed parties.

The only provision that Labor will not support is the lowering of "political campaigner" financial disclosure obligations for advocacy, welfare, environmental and other groups that participate in election campaigns.

The existing 500-member rule was itself an anti-democratic measure introduced under the Hawke Labor government in 1983 to try to prop up the parliamentary establishment, for which popular support was already crumbling because of growing social inequality and declining working and living conditions.

Labor's support for the Morrison government's bills is typical of the role of this trade union-backed party. It is in line with Labor's "constructive" assistance, along with the unions, for the corporate and government response to the pandemic, which has been dominated by the prioritising of private profit over lives and public health.

The same bipartisan front has been formed on every attack on fundamental democratic rights over the past two decades. This includes the repeated tightening of police-state "terrorism" laws, the "foreign interference" legislation to potentially outlaw links to international or overseas parties, and the 2017–2018 expulsion of members of parliament who were possibly entitled to dual citizenship, effectively disqualifying millions of people with immigrant backgrounds from even nominating for election.

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