

Defeat bipartisan drive in Australia to de-register political parties!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party is launching a campaign throughout the working class against blatantly anti-democratic electoral bills that were rushed through Australia's parliament last week at record speed.

Behind the backs of the population—and a wall of silence in the corporate media—the Labor Party joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition government to ram the bills through both houses of parliament in just over 24 hours.

The legislation is part of a global assault on basic democratic rights and a turn to authoritarian forms of rule amid the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and working-class opposition to the “reopening” policies pursued by capitalist governments to boost profits at the expense of millions of lives.

These bills are a bid to muzzle opposition to the increasingly discredited political establishment, which is determined to end current limited restrictions on the basis that people have to “live with the virus,” even as the pandemic resurges out of control in Australia.

The laws seek to strip party registration from all those political parties, including the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), that do not currently have parliamentary representation, by trebling the number of members required from 500 to 1,500 to be officially recognised.

Parties will have to provide new enlarged lists of members, itself a direct violation of political privacy, to the Australian Electoral Commission within three months, amid widespread lockdowns and with a federal election due by next May, at the latest.

The requirement for party registration together with the previous 500-member rule was itself an anti-democratic provision first introduced under the Hawke Labor government in 1984 to try to prop up the two-party Labor-Coalition monopoly.

The SEP has always opposed these party registration laws, which give the capitalist state apparatus the power to supervise political parties and decide which parties have support in the population. That overrides the function of elections themselves, which are meant to determine levels of political support. These laws also compel parties to hand over the details of their members, opening them up to surveillance and harassment.

However, the SEP, under protest, has submitted the names of

500 electoral members in time for each election as demanded by the electoral authorities, in order to exercise our elementary right to stand candidates in elections under our party name.

Without party registration, election candidates cannot identify their political affiliations on ballot papers. They have to stand without any party name, or as unexplained “independents.” This denies the essential right of electors to know the political platforms of candidates.

The SEP calls for a concerted campaign to demand the repeal of these laws and all restrictions on the democratic right of parties and individuals to stand in elections. At the same time, we appeal to all our supporters and readers: Become an electoral member of the SEP to help us retain our registration and defeat this attack.

On the same day—August 26—that the bills were rushed through the Senate, the Coalition government in New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, announced that daily COVID-19 infections had surpassed the 1,000 mark for the first time in any Australian jurisdiction.

Although this level is still far below those resurging in the US and the UK, the myth that Australia is an exception to the global pandemic has been shattered.

The toll is continuing to rise and spread to other parts of the country. Public health experts, medical professionals and healthcare workers are warning that the chronically understaffed public hospitals are already unable to cope with a growing tide of patients.

Unless halted by the working class, this crisis is going to multiply in the months ahead, producing the kind of harrowing healthcare breakdown seen elsewhere, from the US and UK to India and Indonesia.

Just as Australia is no exception to the COVID-19 disaster, it is no exception to the worldwide attack on democratic rights and the cultivation of fascistic forces—from the US to Germany and Brazil—to suppress the rising global struggles of the working class against the disastrous policies of the ruling classes.

The electoral bills rammed through parliament parallel the laws being passed by US states restricting the ability of working-class voters to cast ballots. The crisis of capitalist rule in Australia is no less acute than that revealed by Donald

Trump's plot to overturn the US presidential election and his fomenting of the fascistic January 6 coup attempt.

Globally, the norms of democracy are again breaking down internationally under the pressure of class and geo-strategic tensions, as they did in the 1930s. On this front, Australia has gone further than other Western countries. Labor and the Coalition combined in 2017–18 to orchestrate a nationalist witch hunt, amid an escalating anti-China campaign, to expel members of parliament who were not deemed totally and solely “loyal” to the country because they were entitled to dual citizenship. That effectively disqualified about six million people with immigrant backgrounds from even nominating for election to parliament.

It must never be forgotten that in 1975, amid the last period of global working class upsurge, the veneer of democracy was torn aside in Australia when the governor-general dismissed the elected Whitlam Labor government.

Media polls in Australia give a glimpse of public hostility to the political establishment and its pandemic policies. An Essential poll this week reported that only 12 percent of people would be comfortable with any reopening that increases deaths and hospitalisations.

Newspoll showed a plunge in support for Prime Minister Scott Morrison's Coalition—down to 36 percent—that would result in a landslide electoral defeat. While Labor made some gains and support for the Greens and the far-right One Nation stagnated, unnamed “other” parties surged to 11 percent. Those parties now face deregistration as a result of the new legislation.

Opposition to the Coalition and Labor has grown over the past three decades as a result of the bipartisan pro-business program that has decimated working class jobs, wages and conditions, wound back services and led to widening social inequality. The disaffection has been compounded by Australia's participation in criminal US-led wars, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the 2019 election, some 25 percent of voters cast a ballot for parties other than Labor and Liberal-National.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the opposition and anger in the working class to the two parties of big business—the Coalition and Labor—that have put profit ahead of health and lives. The concern in ruling circles is that this hostility will be expressed in the next election in votes for other political parties, further destabilising the two-party system of rule on which the capitalist class has long depended.

While at present many of the minor parties are of a right-wing character, the real fear haunting the political establishment is that, particularly under conditions of emerging struggles of the working class, the opposition will turn markedly to the left towards a socialist alternative.

Morrison's fragile Coalition government is relying on the Labor Party to spearhead the offensive on democratic rights. In parliament, Labor MPs were the most flagrant in seeking to

stifle dissent. One denounced “people whingeing and whining about this change—so-called believers in freedom and democracy.”

Labor's role is bound up with its “constructive” support, together with the trade unions, in policing the corporate and government response to the pandemic. This bipartisan front is entrenched in the “national cabinet” of federal, state and territory government leaders, mostly from the Labor Party. Meeting behind closed doors, and cloaked by secrecy provisions, this unelected body has constituted a virtual “war cabinet,” running the country by decrees.

The SEP, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has called on workers and youth to take matters into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees in workplaces and suburbs to fight for the necessary measures to protect working people. To combat the pandemic an international strategy is needed. The ICFI has advocated the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to develop this struggle worldwide.

Above all, the working class must have a political voice, which the ruling class through its latest legislation is seeking to stifle. The opposition to the dictates of big business and its political servants needs to be guided by a socialist program that puts the social needs of working people—above all their health and lives—ahead of the private profits of the wealthy few. The SEP alone fights for this perspective.

We appeal to all our existing electoral members, our readers, members of rank-and-file committees and all working people, students and youth: Help us recruit the extra 1,000 electoral members that we need to retain our party registration.

To discuss and take forward this fight, we urge our readers to contact the SEP via our website, Facebook, Twitter, email, or by calling 02 8218 3222.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)