

How the Australian Labor Party spearheaded the ramming of anti-democratic electoral laws through parliament

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Labor Party parliamentarians played the leading role, working hand-in-hand with the Liberal-National Coalition government ministers, in rushing anti-democratic electoral bills through Australia's parliament last week in just over 24 hours.

Labor and the Coalition—the two main parties of capitalist rule—hold the overwhelming majority of seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, so they collaborated to push the bills through in record time.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has launched a campaign throughout the working class against the laws. The corporate and political establishment is seeking to suppress the rising opposition to its “reopening” drive as the COVID-19 pandemic resurges, threatening thousands of working-class lives, including those of children.

Nothing comparable to last week's scenes in parliament has been seen since November 2005, when Labor, as well as the Greens, helped the Howard Coalition government recall the Senate to pass sweeping police-state “terrorism” legislation in just 36 hours. That unanimous stand was based on Howard's dubious claim, never substantiated, that his government had received “specific intelligence” about a terrorist threat.

Labor's role in spearheading the passage of the latest bills is revealing. It reflects the nervousness in ruling circles that the resistance of workers, students and parents to the premature return to classrooms and workplaces could erupt out of the control of the increasingly discredited and detested Coalition government.

Hence the need to shore up Labor's vote, as well as the Coalition's, by barring access to elections for alternative parties. That includes the SEP, the only one advancing the necessity for workers to mobilise on the basis of a socialist perspective to protect lives and eradicate COVID-19.

As the SEP explained in its statement yesterday, “Defeat bipartisan Australian drive to de-register political parties!” the laws set out to strip party registration from every party

not currently represented in parliament. With a federal election looming, the legislation compels parties to provide details of 1,500 members—trebling the previous requirement—within just three months, all in the middle of widespread lockdowns.

Without registered party status, election candidates cannot identify their political affiliations on ballot papers. They must be listed without any party name, or as “independents.”

That not only denies the essential right of political parties to campaign and communicate their views in elections. It robs voters of the ability to cast conscious political votes.

One of the bills specifically seeks to block support for the socialist program advocated by the SEP. It bans parties from using the names “socialist” or “communist” (as well as “labor,” “liberal and “green”) if another registered party has already claimed that label, no matter how falsely.

Another provision restricts voting rights by cutting pre-poll voting to a maximum of 12 days before elections. This undercuts the ability of many working-class voters to cast ballots—more than 40 percent of the electorate voted pre-poll or by post at the last election in 2019.

The introduction and passage of these bills have been buried throughout the corporate media. There is clear concern in the ruling class that support is collapsing for the long-time parties of capitalist rule, and the public must be kept in the dark about the efforts to prop them up.

Last week's token two-hour “debates” in each house of parliament demonstrated that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's Coalition government is relying on Labor to prosecute the attack on democratic rights.

Labor MPs were the most aggressive exponents of the bills. Milton Dick, who holds the seat of Oxley in western Brisbane, denounced “people whingeing and whining about this change—so-called believers in freedom and democracy.”

Dick also provided a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes operation between the government and Labor to produce the bills. He said Labor's shadow minister for electoral matters

Senator Don Farrell had worked “incredibly hard” with Morrison’s right-hand man, Assistant Minister Ben Morton, “to ensure that we do work in a bipartisan way.”

Both Dick and Morton declared, without explanation, that some “minor parties” already met the new 1,500-member threshold. They referred to the Animal Justice Party, Shooters, Fishers and Farmers, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, Sustainable Australia and the Liberal Democratic Party. These are all pro-capitalist parties, regarded as useful safety valves to divert the disaffection back into the parliamentary arena.

Labor speakers claimed that the bills would prevent billionaires such as mining magnate Clive Palmer registering parties without real members. But like the other parties with seats in parliament, Palmer’s United Australia Party is exempt from the membership requirement, having just recruited far-right Coalition defector Craig Kelly.

The truth is that all the parliamentary parties would have difficulty nominating 1,500 members, unless they could count MPs, staffers, trade union officials and other office holders. They are bureaucratic shells, dominated by branch-stacking conducted by narrowly-based factional powerbrokers.

Labor and the Coalition were intent on seeking to deregister as many parties as possible. They summarily rejected amendments by Kelly and another right-wing figure, Senator Jacqui Lambie, to lower the membership requirement rule to 1,000, and make it apply to only new parties applying for registration, not those already registered.

Another Labor spokesman, shadow minister Andrew Giles, gave voice to the concerns within the capitalist establishment that alternative parties can gain wider support by standing in federal elections. He said a registered party could “build a profile and name recognition” by having its name on ballot papers.

Giles provided an insight into the profoundly anti-democratic outlook that permeates the ruling class. He declared that such ballot recognition was a “privilege” and “significant benefit,” not a basic democratic right. It was an “advantage” that came with “responsibilities” to uphold the parliamentary order.

Likewise, Giles agreed with his Coalition colleagues that registered parties had to hand over membership lists in order to demonstrate a “genuine base of community support.” That denies the function of elections themselves, which are meant to determine levels of political support.

In an attempt to distance her party from the anti-democratic move, Greens Senator Larissa Waters spoke and voted against the bills in Senate. In the House of Representatives, however, Greens leader Adam Bandt notably remained silent.

Waters said the de-registration measures were an “attack on our democracy.” But the Greens supported the previous 500-member rule, which was an anti-democratic provision introduced under the Hawke Labor government in 1984, requiring party registration for the first time.

Combined with state funding for the parliamentary parties, the 1984 laws were themselves a bid to shore up the parliamentary establishment, for which popular support was already crumbling because of growing social inequality and declining working and living conditions.

The party registration scheme was a pre-emptive strike against working-class unrest. The Hawke government’s corporatist Prices and Incomes Accords with the trade unions paved the way for a decades-long assault on workers’ jobs and conditions provoking widespread disaffection and opposition among workers.

The 1984 legislation proved unsuccessful in bolstering the parliamentary order, however. The share of votes going to Labor and the Coalition has continued to fall, down to 75 percent in 2019. This reflects the deepening hostility to their bipartisan pro-business program.

The SEP has always opposed the party registration laws, which also compel parties to hand over the details of their members. That opens them up to surveillance and harassment, and violates the principle of secret ballots, which are meant to provide voters with privacy regarding their political affiliations.

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

To discuss and take forward this fight, we urge readers to contact the SEP:

Website: <http://www.sep.org.au/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/SocialistEqualityPartyAustralia/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/sep_australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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