“A blatant attempt to keep power concentrated in their own hands”—Workers denounce Australian electoral laws

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is stepping-up its campaign against anti-democratic electoral laws, rushed through the Australian parliament in less than 24 hours on August 26. The measures are part of an escalating assault on the basic rights of the working class.

The Labor Party opposition worked in lockstep with the Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government to pass the legislation, which forces parties that do not have a seat in parliament to submit a list of 1,500 members to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), treble the previous number.

Under conditions where the Delta variant of COVID-19 is raging across the country, all 36 minor parties now have less than three months to present this new list of members or face deregistration, which means they cannot run in the federal elections with their own name on the ballot paper. The AEC has been given the power to decide which parties can include certain words in their registered party name, such as “socialist” or “communist.”

The SEP has begun a determined campaign to defeat these laws, demanding the removal of all restrictions on the right of parties and individuals to run in elections. On Sunday September 19, the SEP is holding an online public meeting, to discuss the campaign and how to advance this fight. Click here to register.

At the same time, the SEP is appealing to all supporters and readers to join the campaign and become an electoral member to help ensure that it can advance a socialist perspective at the next election. The comments below are part of a series of interviews and statements from electoral members, *World Socialist Web Site* readers and others supporting this campaign.

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Robert Thomas is a 38-year-old electrician who worked for 20 years in the mining industry, until he was recently injured in the workplace. He discovered the *World Socialist Web Site* last year and subscribed to its daily newsletter. Thomas decided to become an SEP electoral member, after reading about the new electoral laws on the WSWS.

“I think these new electoral laws are disgusting. They put the final nail in the coffin for presenting different ideas to the Australian public. Labor and Liberal aren’t that different. I hate that it is a two-party system in Australia,” he told the SEP.

“The mass media distracts everyone and dictates to people what news is considered important. Google is also seeking to prevent people from joining the dots. The biggest voice in the world is money.

“Controversy about vaccinations is being whipped up in the media, but what about the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan? I think Bush, Howard and Blair are all war criminals for launching these wars overseas, but they will never get tried in court and now they are preparing for war with China.

“Capitalism may have worked in the 1800s, but capitalism today—I’m totally against it—because it’s just feeding the top one percent of the population. There’s a huge wage gap developing today.

“Bob Hawke [former ACTU president and Australian Labor Party prime minister] passed away with a $9 million estate. How does an ex-trade unionist get that much wealth? Workers everywhere are being used more and more. There should be more rights given to the workforce, with workers in every country given decent conditions and pay,' Thomas said.

Aditya, an overseas graduate with a Master of

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Biomedical Science, is from a religious minority in Pakistan, and came to Australia to escape rising communalism in the region. He arrived as an 18-year-old, commencing a Bachelor of Science in 2016, and completing his masters amid the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020.

Like many overseas students, the cost of acquiring his qualifications in Australia was very high for his family, and the pandemic has added further burdens. Aditya has no access to government assistance, state-funded medical care or a guaranteed placement in his field. Not wanting to further burden his family, he is obliged to work as a cleaner or fast food delivery driver.

Although he spent most of his adult life studying, while paying taxes in Australia, Aditya is unable to exercise the most basic rights guaranteed to the rest of the population, including being able to vote in elections. This means the Australian Electoral Commission refuses to classify him as an electoral member of the SEP.

"The Australian government's new measures to limit voting rights do not surprise me," he said. "Almost everyone would agree that this is a blatant attempt by the existing government to silence opposition and keep power concentrated in their own hands."

"There are already legal barriers to free democratic elections in Australia, one example being that only citizens can vote. But for me to become a citizen would take several years and huge amounts of money.

"There are many people who have lived in Australia for years, studying as part of the country's 'export' of higher education, usually working in small underpaid or specialised jobs with valuable skills, but who have no say in the elections."

Adiyya said broad layers of the population had "no confidence" in Labor and the Liberal-National coalition.

"If the entire population knew about these laws this would only increase their dissatisfaction with the large parties, and make them more interested in other options," he continued.

"This is what these laws are trying to prevent, but there's no way for the government to convince most people that this is a fair decision that casts them in a good light, so they'd rather keep it quiet. It's also worth noting that the SEP managed to achieve the [previously] required 500 electoral members just a few months ago. The government is conscious of preventing popular support for socialism."

The new election laws were being imposed, Aditya noted, "right when establishment parties internationally are being challenged for their reckless response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The pandemic has made the priorities of governments around the world starker. Limitless financial aid is provided to the super rich, while many ordinary people have been left to fall into poverty or risk disease. Seeing this unfold would make many people more conscious about the indifference of the major parties to the needs of the people, and make them more interested in other parties.

"In Australia, even the [state] governments that had initially made efforts to eliminate the virus, did so too late and without sufficiently supporting the disadvantaged. Now they are allowing the pandemic to return in force, blaming individuals who aren't following rules, while allowing workplaces to open."

Aditya met the SEP in 2019 and regularly attended International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) meetings in 2020. He decided this year to take up the fight for the SEP's socialist and internationalist program.

"I'm attracted to the SEP because of the depth of their analysis of events and history. The policy of internationalism is of great importance to me because the problems of our time are far beyond the scope of single countries and attempts to solve them are held back by national divisions.

"People should become electoral members of the SEP because this party, in Australia and in every other country where it operates, fights in a principled way against the greatest problems of our time. They are fighting on a global level that both understands and matches the scale of these problems."

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