

Australia: Why are the socialists leading the fight to defend basic democratic rights?

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Since the Liberal-National government and the Labor Party joined forces to ram nakedly anti-democratic electoral laws through the Australian parliament last month, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has conducted an intensive campaign against the legislation.

These laws compel all parties, including the SEP, that do not have a seat in parliament to submit lists of the names and addresses of 1,500 members to the electoral authorities—suddenly trebling the previous requirement. These parties must do so by December 2, amid the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and widespread lockdowns, or they will be denied the elementary democratic right to have their party names on ballot papers.

These laws make a mockery of any concept of democracy. Both the government and the Labor Party insist that being able to stand as a candidate under a party name is a “privilege,” not a right. And that an arbitrary figure of 1,500 members is needed to prove “sufficient community support.”

That overrides the very function of elections themselves, which are meant to allow the voters to determine which political parties and programs they support.

The SEP is demanding the repeal of these laws and the removal of all restrictions on the right of parties and individuals to run in elections.

This stands in stark contrast to the ongoing wall of silence in the corporate media and throughout the political establishment, including by those who claimed to oppose the laws but have conducted no campaign whatsoever against them.

Why are the socialists fighting these laws, and why are they the only ones doing so?

With the ruling class and its political servants making

a farce of the democratic pretensions of the electoral process, it falls to the socialists to defend fundamental democratic rights, which have been won by the working class in two centuries of bitter struggles against the capitalist class.

This goes back to the Marxist movement’s support for the fight for universal suffrage and secret ballots, as was taken up by the mass Chartist movement in Britain in the 19th century against the prohibitive property qualifications imposed by the capitalist elite.

In fact, the fight to defend—and extend—basic democratic rights is part and parcel of the struggle for socialism, that is, a genuinely democratic and egalitarian society based on the informed, active and articulate participation of all working people. As we explain in the SEP’s *Statement of Principles*, “there will be no democracy without socialism” because “political equality is impossible without economic equality.”

While genuine socialists understand well the limited and increasingly corroded character of capitalist parliamentary democracy, we defend to the hilt all the democratic and social gains won by the working class in the past. We are not indifferent at all to the drive by the corporate and financial elite to tear up essential democratic rights, including the right to vote and freedom of speech and association, and resort to authoritarian forms of rule.

These electoral laws are an obvious bid to prop up the increasingly loathed parliamentary establishment and stifle political opposition by seeking to de-register most parties outside the political elite, including the SEP.

It is no coincidence that this legislation was suddenly unveiled amid the COVID-19 disaster and the growing toll of hospitalisations and deaths caused by the capitalist elite’s “reopening” drive, and just before the

announcement of the new anti-China AUKUS pact and war preparations announced by the governments of the US, Britain and Australia.

Above all, the ruling establishment fears that the widespread popular opposition and political discontent that these conditions are generating will find conscious expression in a turn by workers and youth to the socialist alternative advanced by the SEP.

Real social change will not come through the current anti-democratic apparatus. Nevertheless, the SEP stands candidates in elections in order to broadcast the fight for a socialist program as widely as possible and inform the growing struggles of the working class with a clear socialist perspective.

For all the claims of capitalist governments, such as Australia's, to represent "democracy," the latest laws are another warning that there is no support whatsoever within the capitalist class and its political servants for fundamental democratic rights.

Around the world the ruling classes are resorting to vote-stripping laws and other anti-democratic measures. The ever-widening social inequality and rising class tensions are proving incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

In Australia, the 1901 Constitution, a colonial-era relic, reflects the true anti-democratic history and character of the ruling establishment. No right to vote is enshrined and the word "democracy" appears nowhere. There is no Bill of Rights protecting free speech, due process, habeas corpus (no detention without trial), freedom of assembly and association or any other key democratic right, unlike the US Constitution, which still stands as a product of a popular revolution against British rule, despite its evisceration by successive US administrations.

The readiness of the capitalist class to cast aside the façade of parliamentary democracy was already displayed in 1975. The "reserve powers" of the British monarchy, preserved by the Constitution in the hands of the governor-general, were invoked to dismiss an elected government, that of Whitlam, under conditions of global class struggles and political turmoil.

Another warning came in 2017-18. A nationalist witch-hunt, accompanied by intensifying anti-China propaganda, saw the High Court effectively disqualify millions of people from even standing for parliament under this Constitution, due to their immigrant

background. Because they are possibly entitled to dual citizenship, they are deemed to lack "sole loyalty" to the Australian capitalist nation-state.

To defeat the bipartisan attempt to strangle democratic rights and stifle the struggle for socialism, the SEP is also appealing to our supporters and readers and all working people, students and youth to become electoral members of the SEP. Help us recruit the extra 1,000 electoral members that we need to retain our party registration and take forward the fight for socialism!



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