

Australian Labor Party's decay further revealed at anti-corruption hearing

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Further evidence of the advanced rot of the Australian Labor Party, the country's oldest party of capitalist rule, emerged this week during hearings by the Victorian state Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC).

On Monday, the opening day of an IBAC public hearing, a key senior federal Labor parliamentarian admitted "stacking" local party branches by paying for bulk false memberships, hiring taxpayer-funded "ghost" electoral staff who did no work because they were deployed for the use of party factional powerbrokers, and participating in rigged party ballots.

Anthony Byrne, who is deputy chairman of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, testified that he had been involved in such activities for more than 22 years—ever since he entered parliament in 1990. Asked by counsel assisting the inquiry, Chris Carr SC, whether he had been involved in branch stacking, Byrne said: "I certainly have."

Byrne said he used a "kitty" to pay for party memberships, and estimated that he had paid about \$2,000 in annual membership fees during the past five years alone.

Some of the evidence provided a picture of how extensive ballot-rigging is inside the Labor Party. Faction bosses altered ballot papers to ensure the election of their candidates for pre-selection for parliamentary seats or for party conference delegates.

If branch members voted for the wrong candidate, reissued ballots were re-completed to support the preferred candidate, signed off and submitted to the party's head office. When Carr asked Byrne if about 40 percent of the ballots issued in his Melbourne southeastern electorate of Holt had to be reissued, he replied: "I wasn't aware it was such a huge figure."

Another means of boosting votes was to have

members sign envelopes containing blank ballot papers. These would be collected by ministerial and electorate staff, completed and submitted to the head office.

The inquiry was shown a text message from Byrne to faction powerbroker Adem Somyurek asking him to send over one of Somyurek's parliamentary staff members, Adam Sullivan, to complete ballot papers.

"We have 210 ballot papers that need to be filled out today from what I've just heard," Byrne texted. "I think we need Sullivan to come to my office to complete otherwise they won't be done. "Then papers need to go to head office."

The text was believed to have been sent during delegate elections for the 2018 Labor Party national conference. Byrne told the inquiry: "If you're saying that somebody else filling in that ballot paper is forgery then that's forgery."

IBAC's "Operation Watts" is a joint investigation with the Victorian Ombudsman into branch stacking, misuse of parliamentary staff for political purposes and misuse of public money, granted by the state Labor government to community associations, to fund party political activities.

When IBAC commissioner Robert Redlich asked how "nothing seemed to have altered" after a 2018 Ombudsman's report had criticised the party for misusing public funds to pay staff members to perform such factional work, Byrne said the practices had been enmeshed in the party's fabric since the 1990s. "I don't think the system ever stopped," he said.

Byrne's testimony quickly triggered the resignation of a former right-wing factional colleague, state Child Protection Minister Luke Donnellan. That made Donnellan the fourth Victorian state cabinet minister to quit over the current IBAC allegations, which were first aired in June 2020 by Nine Entertainment media

platforms.

However, Labor's federal leader Anthony Albanese has refused to call for the resignation of Byrne, who is closely connected to the US and Australian intelligence and military establishment through his role on the parliamentary security committee. Albanese insisted that the IBAC "process" had to be completed first. He even denied any knowledge of the branch-stacking, despite last year's media exposures.

Significantly, IBAC commissioner Redlich thanked Byrne for his testimony. Byrne hosted secret cameras in his office for the Nine Network operation, filming Somyurek and his staff members enrolling and paying for bulk party memberships. Reportedly, at least 4,500 of Labor's claimed 16,000 members in the state of Victoria were falsely registered this way.

Massive inflation and manipulation of party membership numbers and votes is far from new in the Labor Party. Two decades ago, a report by former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke and ex-New South Wales (NSW) Premier Neville Wran described it as a "cancer" eating away at the party. Despite such token damage-control operations, the branch stacking has only gotten worse, and the party's actual membership has continued to collapse.

For decades in fact, Labor has been a rotted-out hollow shell. It has virtually no real working class members, just parliamentarians, staffers, union officials and careerists. That enables branch stacking by factional powerbrokers and allied trade union bureaucrats to control pre-selections for parliamentary seats and access to other lucrative posts. Similar methods are used to inflate union memberships, which also have shrivelled, in order to give union bosses voting blocs at party conferences.

Somyurek's power base, for example, was an alliance formed in 2018 between right-wing factions and associated unions and an "Industrial Left" grouping of supposedly militant unions, such as the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union.

Much more may yet emerge from the IBAC inquiry. A major concern in ruling circles, after more than a decade of political instability, is to fashion a political instrument able to fully impose the assault they demand on working class jobs and conditions—an offensive intensified as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Yesterday's editorial in the Murdoch media's *Australian* demanded that Albanese stop "ducking questions" about Byrne's evidence and "clean up" the Labor Party. "Business as usual will not be good enough," it warned.

The Liberal-National Coalition also has been wracked by rampant branch stacking for years. After decades of declining living and working conditions and worsening social inequality, public support for these twin formations of capitalist rule has plunged.

That is why both parties jointly pushed through the federal parliament on August 26 new anti-democratic electoral laws that seek to de-register parties, like the Socialist Equality Party, that currently have no members in parliament.

The IBAC process also could be used to threaten the survival of the Victorian state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews, unless it continues to rapidly "reopen" the economy for corporate profit-making, despite record COVID-19 Delta infections. In neighbouring NSW an anti-corruption inquiry was used to replace Gladys Berejiklian as state premier with Dominic Perrottet, who has quickly accelerated the lifting of pandemic safety measures.

IBAC is simultaneously conducting another investigation, behind closed doors so far, into dealings between the firefighters' trade union and the government of Andrews, who is reportedly part of that inquiry.



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