

Australian Greens keep their mouths shut on the new anti-democratic electoral laws

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In a brief attempt by the Greens to posture as a critic of Australia's new party deregistration laws, Senator Larissa Waters spoke and voted against the bills in the Senate as they were being rammed through on August 26.

Waters said the measures to de-register parties that fail to submit the details of 1,500 members—trebling the previous requirement—were an “attack on our democracy.”

In the House of Representatives the day before, however, Greens leader Adam Bandt notably remained mute. And neither Bandt nor Waters, the Greens’ spokesperson for “Democracy,” have said a word since, let alone conducted a campaign against the laws.

Waters had issued a media release on August 24 criticising the Labor Party for agreeing to “wave through” the Liberal-National government’s bills. In reality, Labor spearheaded the passage of the laws through both houses of parliament in just over 24 hours.

In her media release, Waters stated: “The Libs and Labor are running scared. They know they’re on the nose with the electorate and they know their share of the primary vote is collapsing. This is a blatant and utterly shameless attempt to shore up their power... With an election looming dozens of minor parties are now at risk of being deregistered.”

This pretence of concern by the Greens for basic democratic rights is an utter fraud, as proven by the fact that they have kept their mouths shut ever since. If the laws are a “blatant” and “shameless” attack on democracy—which they are—then a powerful public campaign must be conducted to demand their repeal.

That fight has been taken up by only one party, however. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is conducting a determined campaign in the working class

to overturn the laws and all restrictions on the rights of parties and individuals to stand in elections.

For all their claims of concern for “democracy,” the Greens supported an amendment by right-wing Senator Jacqui Lambie to accept the new 1,500-member requirement for new parties applying for registration, but not those already registered.

Moreover, the Greens support the previous 500-member rule, which was itself an anti-democratic provision introduced under the Hawke Labor government in 1983, requiring party registration for the first time ever in order to have a party’s name on ballot papers alongside its candidates.

Combined with state funding for the parliamentary parties, the 1983 laws were an earlier unsuccessful bid to shore up the two traditional ruling parties, for which electoral support was already unravelling because of the mounting bipartisan assault on jobs, working and living conditions, and ever-widening social inequality.

The Greens also have a record of backing similar laws at the state level. In New South Wales, the Greens combined with the other parliamentary parties—Labor, Liberal, National and Democrats—to push through legislation to more than treble, from 200 to 750, the membership requirement for registered parties. That followed a 1999 election in which support for minor parties and independents rose to nearly 35 percent in the state’s upper house.

Over the past two decades, the Greens have become a pivotal part of the political establishment, particularly since the ignominious collapse of an earlier “third party,” the Australian Democrats, after the Democrats struck a sordid deal with the Howard Liberal-National government in 1999 to back the introduction of the regressive goods and services tax.

At times, particularly in order to appeal to younger

voters, the Greens depict themselves as a “progressive” party on issues such as climate change, war and social justice. But they rest on an affluent upper-middle class milieu and are thoroughly committed to the capitalist profit system and to propping up the parliamentary order.

The Greens’ silence on the electoral laws dovetails with their pitch to form another *de facto* coalition government with the Labor Party, as they did under Julia Gillard from 2010 to 2013. For weeks, Bandt has been appealing for the formation of such a government to replace the increasingly loathed Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison.

In a media release on September 15, for example, Bandt announced a reshuffle of the Greens’ “shadow Ministerial” portfolios to set the party up for “balance of power negotiations” for “the likely event of a minority Parliament” after the looming federal election. Bandt promoted the prospect of “kicking the government out and getting the Greens into balance of power.”

The Greens’ last such power-sharing deal, with the minority Gillard government, allowed Labor to barely cling to office while it signed up to the US military build-up against China, including the stationing of US Marines near Darwin. The Gillard government also cut off welfare benefits to single parents, slashed university funding, and kept refugees incarcerated on remote Pacific islands.

In 2013, that regressive agenda saw the government defeated in an electoral landslide, paving the way for the current Liberal-National government.

Any future Labor-Greens government would have an even more reactionary agenda, as the ruling elite ramps up the confrontation with China, seeks to force the population to “live with” COVID-19, at the expense of lives and health, in order to boost corporate profits, and deepens the offensive against workers’ jobs and conditions.

That is why, after their initial posturing, the Greens are content to let the laws stand. They want to be part of a government that will seek to stifle dissent, particularly working-class opposition, and prevent it from challenging the parliamentary establishment.

It is no accident that it is the socialists, that is the SEP and its members and supporters, who are fighting the assault on fundamental democratic rights by the ruling

class and its political servants. The working class is the only social force that can answer this offensive, which is part of a global turn toward anti-democratic measures.

As we have explained, 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.

To help defeat the bipartisan attempt to strangle democratic rights and stifle the struggle for socialism, the SEP is appealing to our supporters and readers and all working people, students and youth to become electoral members of the SEP so that we can retain our party registration.



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