

# Why the SEP has taken up the fight against Australia's anti-democratic electoral laws

Cheryl Crisp

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*The following remarks were delivered by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) National Secretary Cheryl Crisp at an online SEP (Australia) public meeting on Sunday, October 31.*

*The meeting, which can be viewed in full here, outlined the relationship between anti-democratic electoral laws, aimed at deregistering "minor" parties, the homicidal and pro-business pandemic policies of the ruling elite and the deepening crisis of the capitalist system. Speakers explained that the electoral measures are an attempt to prevent mounting social opposition from finding political expression, and outlined the SEP's campaign to defeat them.*

When it was announced on August 26 that the Australian parliament had passed the new electoral laws, which required that our party, along with 35 others without parliamentary representation, would have to provide treble the number of members to qualify for registration under the Electoral Act, we had to decide whether we would undertake to meet this requirement.

It was, after all, and not coincidentally, a demand made by the government under conditions of lockdowns in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, with infections soaring to levels not seen in the course of the past almost two years, making it both illegal and dangerous for our members to campaign and visit contacts—a consideration that was not lost on the forces who passed the bill, or the Australian Electoral Commission.

Our party, however, decided that we would undertake this campaign. Certainly we are fighting to increase our electoral membership and for the repeal of the anti-democratic laws, but we harbour no illusion or faith in parliamentary democracy. It is one, but only one, of the forms of class rule. There are others and they are being brought forward most sharply in the US, where fascist forces were incited and organised by Trump and his followers to overturn the 2020 election and establish a fascist form of rule in America. It would be a false conception to think "it couldn't happen here." But the outcome of that process will be determined in struggle.

That struggle itself is bound up with the intersection of the Trotskyist movement and the growing struggles of the working class, of which this campaign is a part. The SEP has a broader perspective—the campaign for our electoral members is part of the fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class, and for the break from the confines of parliamentary democracy and the organisations which perpetuate it.

The fact that the growing opposition to the perspective of these governments, Liberal and Labor, exists within the population and the working class threatens the very functioning of these mechanisms of rule and is of profound objective significance.

Our decision has been proven correct and the SEP stands alone in the campaign to defeat these laws.

Within less than two months of the passage of these electoral laws, the Morrison government is now implementing legislation demanding that voter ID is mandatory in order to vote. The purported reason is voter fraud. There is not one shred of evidence, let alone proof, that voter fraud

exists. This is again an attempt to prevent predominately working-class people, the elderly and the poor from voting.

Australia was one of the few countries which, immediately the pandemic hit, all but shelved parliament. The government ruled through the "National Cabinet," an unelected body which could not be scrutinised because all its deliberations are secret. It is not subject to Freedom of Information applications. It is, in fact, an extra-parliamentary form of rule that is dominated by Labor state and territory governments.

Parliament has rubber-stamped the National Cabinet "roadmap" out of COVID-19 by implementing the "let it rip" policy so associated with the Johnson government in the UK, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Trump in the US, continued by Biden.

All the states, for varying periods of time, were able to eliminate the virus via public health measures of lockdowns, social distancing, masks, contact tracing and quarantining. This has, within a matter of weeks, been entirely dispensed with, spearheaded by the NSW Liberal government, but taken up and advanced by the Victorian Andrews Labor government, then the Queensland Labor government and now the South Australian government.

The reckless and dangerous policy of lifting all restrictions, opening up everything, including schools, is now resulting in the spread of the virus, most sharply in Victoria, but this will inevitably spread throughout the country. The outcome of this policy is both predictable and terrible. This has and will continue to lead to unnecessary infections and deaths and the suffering of thousands of people with long-COVID. No political party in parliament has opposed this.

Where this policy has been implemented, a human catastrophe has resulted, whether it is the UK, the US or elsewhere. Since Britain's so-called Freedom Day on July 19, there have been more than 11,000 deaths. In the 101 days since "Freedom Day," 3.4 million people have been infected with the virus, bringing the total to almost 9 million people. It estimated that one in every 55 people in England has had COVID, up from one in 60 people two weeks ago. This is the future for all countries that adopt this policy.

## **Scientists, the working class and the fight for the elimination of COVID-19**

Crises test all political parties and this one is no different. There is only one political party that has fought for a policy of elimination of the virus, based on science and the interests of society as a whole. That is the International Committee of the Fourth International and its parties—the Socialist Equality Parties. Every other party has either opposed this or accommodated to variations of herd immunity.

An online event that was held a week ago, the clip of which we have viewed, is one of immense significance. Let us remember that this pandemic is the greatest health, social and political crisis confronting mankind since World War II. Almost 250 million people have been infected and 5 million are dead, and these are wildly understated figures.

Yet not one other political organisation, not one institution, think tank or

government, has held a discussion with ordinary people to explain what this virus is, how it developed, how it transmits and how it can be stopped. Not one.

The International Committee and the *World Socialist Web Site* held the online webinar, which brought together scientists who have since the outbreak of the pandemic fought for an elimination program in defence of the lives of millions.

They appeared on the platform with workers who also have fought in defence of the lives of children, bus drivers, teachers, students and workers. Without this information—verifiable, scientific and truthful—workers are unable to effectively mobilise to end this crisis. Such information is suppressed by the media, television and the trade unions.

But the point which David North raised in chairing the event is that science cannot end the pandemic alone. It requires a social force for the scientists to align with that can undertake this task, and that is the working class. The online discussion established categorically that the pandemic can and must be ended. The measures not only exist to end the pandemic, but it has been demonstrated in New Zealand and China, even prior to vaccines, that it was possible.

North said it is not the characteristics of the virus that enabled it to spread unchecked through the world. Rather, the virus was working in a definite social and economic environment where decisions were made not to take the necessary measures.

The decision in New Zealand and Australia to dispense with the necessary measures to stop the spread of the virus took place not because they were not effective but precisely because they were. Enormous pressure is now being exerted on China to cease its elimination strategy and, as the media crowed after the Ardern government did just that, to “join the rest of the world.”

The priority is production and profit. When there is even one country in the world which disproves the mantra that one has to live with the virus then it undermines that approach. The ruling classes don't care about the infections; they don't care about the deaths. What they care about is the accumulation of wealth and riches, and if mass deaths are the price which must be paid by millions of people, then so be it.

The virus cannot be eliminated without a global strategy. In their different ways and their differing experiences, the scientists outlined that. That is something which is hidden from the world's population.

#### **The working class needs truth and information**

Truth and information are revolutionary issues. The treatment of Julian Assange proves that. His unpardonable crime, a crime for which US imperialism, the British state and the Australian government would happily see him pay for with his life, was to provide information to millions of people about the war crimes of all these governments. So those governments that have carried out these crimes against humanity are the same that are planning to extradite him to a 175-year life sentence in the US, or to assassinate him.

Assange is certainly not the first political prisoner to be jailed by imperialism. The most famous were Sacco and Vanzetti—two Italian-born American anarchist workers framed for murder in the US and condemned to death in 1920. This conviction led to the mobilisation of millions of workers throughout the world, including in Australia and New Zealand, in defence of these workers.

But no such mass movement has taken place in defence of Assange. Why? The central reason is the role of identity politics and the promotion of the now entirely discredited and disproven allegations of sexual assault levelled against him by Swedish authorities.

In particular, the pseudo-lefts seized on spurious and untested allegations as unchallengeable facts, demanding that Assange return to Sweden to answer them—allegations which never became charges—where he would have been extradited to the US for trial.

Now that he is in the hands of the British state, these organisations say

they oppose his extradition, but they all but placed him in these hands by ensuring he was vilified and separated from the mass of people, particularly young people, who supported him.

The role of the pseudo-lefts has been the same regarding the pandemic and the electoral laws.

Until the past few weeks, if one were to read the pages of *Red Flag*, *Green Left Weekly*, *Jacobin* and others you would be forgiven for thinking there was no pandemic, no health crisis and no attack on democratic rights—and certainly no electoral laws.

Socialist Alternative, in its belated articles on COVID-19, presented it from an utterly nationalist standpoint. In the course of these articles not one politician, political party, union or union leader or even a government is named, let alone indicted for the policies they have enacted.

These are not just errors or omissions but a political perspective. That is to block any independent opposition from workers to the program of the ruling class and the political parties which represent it. These are the same organisations who promoted Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews as an alternative to the Liberal governments of Berejiklian and Morrison. Andrews now leads the pack in opening up and eliminating all restrictions.

Referring to the electoral laws, Socialist Alliance, on September 2, wrote its first and only article on their passing. They used the article, in part, to assert their bona fides as the longest registered socialist party, therefore staking their claim on the name socialist. Neither they nor any of these organisations have conducted any form of campaign at all against these laws.

It required a formal letter from the SEP to Socialist Alliance on September 24 to obtain a statement that they would not use that veto on the use of the name socialist.

We don't raise our role as the only organisation that fights for elimination, that fights in defence of democratic rights, that fights for the education of the working class and that fights for workers and for the unification of the working class on an international basis as a boast. It is the case. What other organisation does?

The party which fights for life over profit, for science over ignorance, for society over the individual is the party which turns to and fights for the mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program.

#### **The growing global class struggle**

Between our first scientists' webinar on August 22 and that of October 24 the most important change which occurred was the upsurge of struggles in the working class.

Mass struggles are taking place throughout many countries but particularly in the US. These struggles are characterised by workers' opposition to the role of the unions.

The fear within the Democratic Party and ruling circles is that the indispensable role that the unions have played in suppressing the struggles of workers and acting as the policeman for the companies is starting to break up.

This is the outcome of the treacherous role the unions have played in the course of the pandemic, forcing workers into unsafe workplaces, teachers and children into unsafe schools, healthcare workers into unsafe and unprotected hospitals. It is also the result of the past 40 years of deteriorating wages and conditions at the hands of the unions and companies.

The opposition of workers to the unions, while entirely progressive, justified and necessary, must be driven and developed by an alternative political perspective. The working class requires a leadership, and one with a program, organisation and orientation—a socialist perspective that fights to educate and clarify, and for workers to take matters into their own hands.

This means developing independent organisations—rank-and-file committees—-independent of the unions, of the Labor Party, of the

Democratic Party—where workers are able to speak to each other, collaborate with their international comrades, and share information, experiences and lessons. That leadership is the International Committee of the Fourth International and the SEP.

It is for that reason that we are fighting against these laws and to win the new electoral members necessary to register. The Australian Electoral Commission is ensuring that this is as difficult as possible. After it invited registered parties to apply for an extension with reasons, we submitted one based on the entirely justifiable protection of our members and contacts from the virus, not to speak of the illegality of campaigning under lockdown for electoral members. This application was summarily rejected, with the commission saying the electoral laws declared that applications for reregistration had to be submitted by December 2.

So we have one month to go. We have little time. We appeal to all of you who are not electoral members to sign up to our party, and to seriously consider joining the SEP as a full member to fight to end the pandemic and for a society which bases itself on the interests of society as a whole, of life over profit, against the drive to war—that is a socialist society.



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