

Australia's voter ID bill: An historic attack on the right to vote

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The Labor Party's bipartisan backing for the party deregistration laws rammed through Australia's parliament on August 26 has encouraged the Liberal-National government to push ahead with another naked attack on democratic rights, this time on the right to vote itself.

A voter ID bill was suddenly introduced in the House of Representatives on October 28. The government is intent on getting the bill through the year's final session of parliament—that is by December 2, in time for the looming federal election.

If successful, the voter ID bill would, for the first time since the days of the Eureka Stockade rebellion by gold rush miners in the 1850s, force voters to produce identification, such as a driver's licence, a Medicare card or a credit card, before being permitted to vote. Voters can also be subjected to intimidating questioning by election officials about their ID documents.

This is an obvious attempt to discourage or block the votes of potentially many thousands of working-class people, especially those likely to have difficulty producing such documents—first-time young voters, the elderly, the jobless and homeless, itinerant workers, indigenous people and others without access to smart phones or the internet.

There will be even longer queues on election day in working class areas, more time required to vote and a more stressful voting experience for everyone.

This bill was unveiled just two months after Labor helped rush through the anti-democratic electoral laws, which deregister and bar the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and other parties without seats in parliament from having their names on ballot papers unless they submit the names and details of 1,500 members—treble the previous requirement—also by December 2.

This is all under conditions of the continuing COVID-19 disaster—the worst global public health crisis for a century, with widespread lockdowns and isolation requirements preventing physical political campaigns against these laws and for new members.

There is no justification for the voter ID bill whatsoever. Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) head Tom Rogers told the Senate last month that voter fraud is a “vanishingly small” issue.

According to the AEC, there were only about 2,000 alleged multiple votes at the last election in 2019, from around 15 million voters. Of those, police investigated just 24 instances and prosecuted no one. Most apparently related to mental health issues.

In other words, there are already checks on alleged voter fraud, and no evidence that any exists.

This is a truly historic attack on the right to vote. According to University of New South Wales historian David Lee, you have to go back to colonial times to find similar laws.

After the 1854 Eureka Stockade revolt against onerous licence fees to hunt for gold, the Victorian colonial government was forced to abandon the mining licence and replace it with a cheaper “Miner's Right,” costing one pound a year, which also conferred the right to vote.

Two years later, laws to allow all men to vote were passed in Victoria. Thus the right to vote itself only came about through mass struggles, as it did in the Chartist movement to demand the franchise in Britain, which found an echo in the Eureka rebellion.

The Morrison government is intent on proceeding despite warnings from Labor, the Greens and some media outlets that the bill is so transparently seeking to discourage voters that it risks discrediting the parliamentary system itself.

“Government must explain benefits of proposed voter ID law,” appealed twin editorials in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Melbourne Age* last month. That is impossible, because there are no benefits!

Instead, the government has adopted the language of Donald Trump and his “big lie” about widespread mail-in vote fraud, with which he incited fascistic followers to try and overturn the results of last year’s US presidential election.

Liberal Party Senator James McGrath told former Sky News host Alan Jones: “Obviously Labor and the Greens are not going to support it [the bill] because they seem to be running a protection racket for voter fraud in this country.”

The bill could even be challenged in the High Court as unconstitutional for being “disproportionate” in excluding people from voting. Constitutional law expert Anne Twomey told the *Guardian*: “The additional procedural burden, the effort required, the confusion that it can create and the message that it sends of being ‘suspect’ or unwanted, may be enough to suppress the vote.”

So why is this bill proceeding?

First, the widely-detested government fears a heavy defeat at the next election, despite the lack of any popular support for Labor. That could mean another “hung” parliament and unstable minority government, unless other parties are excluded, along with disenfranchised voters.

More fundamentally, the ruling class is seeking to stifle dissent under conditions of a worsening political and social crisis, deepened by the profit-driven and criminally premature “reopening” of schools and workplaces in the midst of the global pandemic.

The laws are in line with similar profoundly anti-democratic moves in the US and UK to effectively strip millions of working class, poor and vulnerable people of the right to vote.

Nearly 30 US states have this year introduced laws restricting voting hours, early voting and absentee voting, all in response to Trump’s “stolen election” propaganda. In Britain, Boris Johnson’s Tory government is seeking to introduce photo ID for voting, disenfranchising an estimated 11 million voters, or 24 percent of the electorate, who lack such ID.

As these developments indicate, the ever-more staggering levels of social inequality, intensified by the

pandemic, are incompatible with democratic forms of capitalist rule.

While the Labor Party and the Greens have said they will vote against the bill, no confidence can be placed in them. They only object because the bill could affect their chances of forming a government together after the impending election.

After all, Labor spearheaded the party deregistration laws and the Greens have kept their mouths shut ever since the laws passed. These two parties are also intent on suppressing unrest and propping up the increasingly discredited parliamentary establishment.

The voter ID bill is another critical reason to fight for the defeat of all the new electoral laws and to urge people to join up as electoral members of the SEP.

We are the only party fighting to defend, and extend, the basic democratic rights of the working class. This is an essential component of the struggle for socialism, which is based on the fully informed and active participation of the working class through a workers’ government.



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