

Australian Electoral Commission rejects SEP application for pandemic extension of registration deadline

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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With a crisis federal election looming, the anti-democratic calculations behind the party deregistration laws rammed through Australia's parliament by the Liberal-National Coalition government and the Labor Party in August have been further laid bare.

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a November 11 letter from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) rejected the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) request for a six-week extension of the abrupt December 2 deadline set by the laws to submit the names and details of 1,500 members.

If the SEP fails to meet that requirement—a tripling of the previous 500-member rule—it will be deregistered and barred from having its party name on ballot papers alongside its candidates for the election, which must be held by May.

That would deprive voters of the basic democratic right to vote for candidates identified as socialists under conditions of deepening hostility toward all the parties of the parliamentary establishment.

This is a naked bid to shore up the increasingly discredited major parties as opposition mounts to the deadly corporate-driven “live with the virus” policy of Coalition and Labor governments alike, accompanied by soaring social inequality, the worsening climate change crisis and the rising danger of war.

In its letter, the AEC said it could not grant an extension because “a federal election is due to be held in the first half of 2022.” That makes plain the connection between the new anti-democratic election laws and the intent to try to stifle working-class dissent in the 2022 election.

This rejection reversed a precedent set by the AEC. Because of the widespread movement restrictions and acute dangers to public health during the pandemic, the AEC had granted the SEP a three-month extension during a previous re-registration period in mid-2020.

The AEC's November 11 letter said the 2020 review of party registration eligibility had been “conducted during a different phase of the electoral cycle which afforded the AEC more flexibility to grant extensions.”

The SEP formally requested the latest extension because “of

the greatest health crisis in 100 years in which for more than half the specified period the inhabitants of the most populous states in Australia have been in lockdown therefore, by law, unable to physically campaign for the 1,000 new members.”

The SEP's November 2 application, made by SEP national secretary Cheryl Crisp, pointed out that the pandemic had seriously worsened since the extension granted by the AEC in 2020, which it still had the power to do under the Electoral Act.

Crisp wrote: “On July 30, 2020 in NSW a total of 3,737 cases of COVID-19 had been recorded with 18 cases on that day. In Victoria, which was in the midst of the worse outbreak to that date, there were 9,998 cases recorded, with 694 cases on that day.

“On October 25, 2021, the date of the latest application for a three-month extension, in NSW there were 73,785 total infections with 285 on that day—almost 16 times greater than July 30, 2020. In Victoria, 80,152 cases had been recorded, with 1,389 on that day—more than double the infections of July 30, 2020.

“The fact that governments have responded to these vastly increased infection rates with opposite policies by opening up the borders, travel and the entire economy does not make it safer.”

Crisp asked: “Are you declaring that members of minor parties, including the SEP, must be placed at serious risk of infection, possible long-term illness or death to reach the arbitrary number of members determined by the new Act?”

In its November 11 reply, the AEC did not answer that question. Nevertheless, it baldly insisted that “organisations have been required to adapt to these circumstances over the last 18 months.”

This was the AEC's second rejection of a similar extension request by the SEP, the first one—for three months—having been made on October 15. Yet the SEP has been responding to an invitation by the AEC itself for such requests! On October 8, in formally notifying the SEP of the new laws, the AEC stated: “Requests for extension of the Specified Period should be made in writing and provide reasons why further time is required.”

The AEC's stand confirms the necessity for the determined

campaign being conducted by the SEP against the new laws. As we explained in our September 2 statement launching the campaign:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has only deepened the opposition and anger in the working class to the two parties of big business—the Coalition and Labor—that have put profit ahead of health and lives. The concern in ruling circles is that this hostility will be expressed in the next election in votes for other political parties, further destabilising the two-party system of rule on which the capitalist class has long depended.”

Since then, this political crisis has intensified.

* Even according to the media’s own opinion polls, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government faces a landslide election defeat, with its only hope for survival being that support for Labor remains at near-record lows. Combined backing for the two ruling parties is just 75 percent, and there is rising support for “other” parties. Morrison’s Newspoll net approval rating has slumped to -8, his lowest since the 2019–20 bushfire catastrophe, but Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s rating has fallen to -11.

This raises the prospect of another “hung” parliament and minority government, extending the instability that has wracked the political establishment since the massive defeat suffered by the Howard Coalition government in 2007.

* The global COVID disaster is again spiralling out of control due to the “live with the virus” demand of the corporate elite. Infection and death rates are resurging in Europe and the US. This is a dire warning of what is to come in Australia, especially as the majority of states which have avoided large outbreaks, reopen their borders over the next month. That will expose their vulnerable populations to the highly-transmissible Delta variant.

Even now, more than 1,000 infections are being reported daily in the two most affected states, Victoria and New South Wales. Schools have become pandemic epicentres, with hundreds having to close for periods due to infections among children. Chronically-underfunded public hospital systems are already under stress. Despite the government and media hype about high vaccination rates, less than 70 percent of the population, counting children, has been double-dosed. Immunity is waning, yet almost no one has been triple-dosed.

* For all the talk of “economic recovery,” an estimated 2.5 million workers remain unemployed or “under-employed.” Those with jobs face declining real wages, and escalating attacks on working conditions and job security, with young workers especially hit by the employers’ “gig economy.”

Even by the vastly understated Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, the unemployment rate jumped by 0.6 percentage points to 5.2 percent in October. By the more realistic Roy Morgan surveys, 1.32 million workers were unemployed in October, up 55,000 on September, for an unemployment rate of 9.2 percent, and under-employment was up 0.6 percent points to 8.6 percent, or 1.23 million workers.

Working-class households also confront rising prices, skyrocketing housing costs and record levels of debt, creating the conditions for explosive class struggles.

* Despite deep popular concern, especially among young people, both the Coalition government and the Labor “opposition” have refused to agree to any measures to reduce carbon emissions by anywhere near-enough by 2030 to avert climate disaster. Moreover, the 26th international climate gathering of capitalist government leaders in Glasgow has ended in another abject failure to even “phase out” fossil fuels.

* By signing the AUKUS pact with the US and UK, featuring the acquisition of nuclear attack submarines, the Coalition government, backed by Labor, has stepped up the ruling elite’s commitment to what would be a cataclysmic US-led war against China. Despite barrages of anti-China propaganda, deep anti-war sentiment remains. There is no support for a conflict that could cost millions of lives in China, the US and Australia.

* Over the same months, Labor’s support for the party deregistration laws has encouraged the government to go further. It is attacking the right to vote itself by introducing voter ID laws designed to disenfranchise many working-class voters.

Under these conditions, the working class urgently requires a new leadership. Above all, that is what the ruling class and its political servants are seeking to stifle. The opposition to the dictates of big business must be guided by a socialist program that puts the social needs of working people—first and foremost their health and lives—ahead of the private profits of the wealthy few. The SEP alone fights for this perspective, together with our sister parties internationally.

We therefore appeal to all our electoral members, our readers, members of rank-and-file committees and all working people, students and youth. Regardless of the AEC’s deadline, help us recruit the extra 1,000 electoral members that we need to retain our party registration and take forward the fight for a genuine socialist alternative.



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