

Political turmoil in Australia underscores necessity for fight against anti-democratic new electoral laws

Mike Head**26 November 2021**

The rifts and disarray wracking Australia's Liberal-National Coalition government, and continuing record low support for the opposition Labor Party, underscore the necessity for the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) against the anti-democratic electoral laws that the two ruling parties jointly rammed through parliament at the end of August.

These laws are a naked, yet desperate, bid to prop up the entire discredited political establishment. By deregistering parties without seats in parliament, they seek to stifle dissent as opposition grows to the corporate-driven "live with the virus" drive in the face of the resurging COVID-19 pandemic, escalating social inequality, climate change disaster and danger of war generated by the bipartisan commitment to the intensifying US confrontation with China.

Amid this developing political crisis, on November 11 the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) rejected the SEP's request for a six-week pandemic extension of the sudden 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 looming federal election, which the beleaguered prime minister, Scott Morrison, must call by May.

That would deprive voters of the basic democratic right to vote for candidates identified as socialists under conditions of an intensifying global pandemic catastrophe, now fuelled by the even-more deadly Omicron variant, and rising hostility toward all the parties of the parliamentary establishment.

The emergence of Omicron is a product of the decision of capitalist governments, including in Australia, to reject

a strategy of eliminating COVID-19, instead allowing it to run rampant. Scientists have been warning for months that so long as the virus continues to spread, more infectious and possibly vaccine-resistant variants will emerge.

The events of the past week in Canberra have shown that Morrison's government is increasingly paralysed. Internal revolts have effectively reduced it to a minority government. But media polls show Labor's support languishing at the near-historic low of just over 30 percent that saw Labor suffer a humiliating defeat at the last federal election in 2019. This points to a deepening of the political instability over the past decade of minority or near-minority parliaments and short-term prime ministers.

In fact, the political turmoil has produced another "hung" parliament even before the federal election. Seven government MPs crossed the floor to vote against government legislation this week, and two others declared they would withhold support from all government bills, demanding an end to vaccine mandates.

Today's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* gave vent to the alarm in ruling circles. "Scott Morrison enters this election season as the first prime minister to survive an entire three-year term since John Howard, four prime ministers ago," it noted, but the government had "begun fraying with unexpected ferocity."

Yet the government is able to cling to office because of the equally widespread popular disgust for the Labor Party. Labor suffered a debacle at the 2019 election because working class voters did not believe its phoney "fair go" rhetoric after decades of enforcing big business dictates in partnership with the trade unions, especially since the Hawke-Keating governments of 1983 to 1996.

Since then, Labor has only shifted further to the right. Via the bipartisan "National Cabinet" it has operated lockstep with the government throughout the pandemic,

supporting every pro-business measure, including the massive JobKeeper and other handouts to the financial elite.

Now the demand by governments, both Coalition and Labor, for the population to “live with the virus” has turned reopened schools into pandemic petri dishes. More than 1,200 schools have reported infections in the two most affected states, Victoria and New South Wales. Underfunded for decades, public hospitals and their staff are under enormous strain, with frequent “ramping” of ambulances, as reported COVID-19 cases continue to exceed 1,500 daily in Victoria and NSW combined.

There is deep anger among teachers, parents and health workers, who also look with alarm at the resurgence of the pandemic in Europe and the United States. This is producing growing demands and votes for industrial action despite the efforts of the unions to keep suppressing workers’ opposition.

For all the hype about 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. Young workers especially are being hit by the intensified “gig economy.”

For the wealthy, however, the pandemic has been a bonanza. On the backs of the working class, Australia’s richest 200 individuals and families have increased their wealth by 40 percent to nearly \$500 billion.

On every crucial front—from support for the AUKUS pact to align Australia even more behind US preparations for war against China, to making a mockery of reducing carbon emissions by backing another giant gas project off the Western Australian coast—Labor has not allowed an inch of light between it and the Morrison government.

That is not the result of a cynical “small target” election ploy but of fundamental commitment to the requirements of the corporate elite. It is a warning of the program to be pursued by any new Greens-backed Labor government.

Media polls provide only a distorted picture of the rising political discontent. According to the latest Resolve poll published in Nine media outlets this week, Labor’s primary vote support is just 32 percent, behind the Coalition on 39 percent. Morrison’s net approval rating has plummeted to -9, but Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s is on -14.

Thus far, this unrest is being channelled in big business-backed, mainly right-wing directions, producing a showing of 9 percent support for supposed “independents” and 8 percent for “other parties,”

including the far-right One Nation and mining magnate Clive Palmer’s United Australia Party. However, the real fear in ruling circles is that the disaffection will find conscious expression in the opposed socialist perspective fought for by the SEP.

While Labor and the unions are doing everything they can to keep workers suppressed, violent protests by anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination minorities are being given extensive media coverage in order to cultivate extreme right-wing elements. The aim is to intimidate working people and turn the political elite further in right-wing and authoritarian directions.

As in the current presidential elections in Chile, and earlier in Italy, Greece, France and Spain, the old parties of capitalist rule are fracturing under conditions of immense social polarisation. That underlines the need for the development of a new socialist leadership in the working class, fighting against the lurch of the ruling class to war and fascistic Trump-style forces.

That is the task being taken up by the SEP, not just in the fight to retain its right to run socialist candidates in elections but in the expansion of its base among workers and youth. Regardless of the December 2 deadline set by the government and Labor, we will continue our campaign to win new SEP electoral members.

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. Only the SEP fights for this perspective, together with our sister parties internationally.

We therefore appeal to our electoral members and all working people, students and youth: Help us push ahead to recruit the extra electoral members that we need, not just to retain our party registration but to take forward the fight for a genuine socialist alternative, and consider applying to become full members of the SEP.



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