

Australian Labor Party helps government ram through another anti-democratic electoral law

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On December 2, the very last day of parliament for 2021, the Labor Party again teamed up with the Liberal-National Coalition government to pass another nakedly anti-democratic electoral bill.

At the same time, Labor struck a cynical backroom deal with the government to postpone—but only until after the 2022 election—the Coalition’s widely-opposed bill to force voters to show identification at polling booths.

As part of the deal, Labor helped the Coalition to quickly ram through a bill to force non-party political campaigners to retrospectively file financial records to the election authorities in order to disclose their donors.

This arrangement deliberately makes it more onerous for charities, environmental groups and other campaign groups to conduct political activities or back election candidates.

With virtually no publicity, let alone public debate, the bill was pushed through both houses of parliament in a matter of hours, just like the last anti-democratic electoral laws were in August.

This is under conditions where a plethora of candidates is emerging, many running as independents, to endeavour to exploit the intense political crisis caused by the disarray tearing apart Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s right-wing government and the continued lack of popular support for the pro-business Labor Party.

Labor rescued the government from outright defeat on the voter ID bill, which was one of several key measures that the fractured Coalition could not get through parliament in the final session of the year because of internal revolts.

The voter ID bill has only been put on hold. It has

caused popular outrage, because it is so obviously calculated to discourage or block the votes of potentially many thousands of working-class people. That is especially so for those likely to have difficulty producing the necessary documents—first-time young voters, the elderly, the jobless and homeless, itinerant workers, indigenous people and others without access to smartphones or the internet.

As the WSWWS explained, it represents an historic attack on the right to vote. For the first time since the days of the Eureka Stockade rebellion by gold rush miners in the 1850s, voters would be forced to produce identification, such as a driver’s licence, a Medicare card or a credit card, before being permitted to vote. Voters could also be subjected to intimidating questioning by election officials about their ID documents.

To justify this significant working-class disenfranchisement, the government adopted the language of ex-US President 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.

The bipartisan bill enacted on December 2 deepens the attack on basic democratic rights made when the two ruling parties similarly joined hands in August to rush through laws to deregister all parties without seats in parliament unless they submitted lists of 1,500 members—triple the previous requirement—by this month.

No less than the voter ID bill, these laws are a bid to stifle working class discontent and prevent it from destabilising the increasingly discredited two-party duopoly on which capitalist rule in Australia has

depended since World War II.

While 36 parties are affected by the demand to hand over the details of so many members, in violation of their privacy and right to a secret ballot, this deregistration drive is particularly directed against the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the only party advancing a genuine social alternative to the ruling establishment.

If the SEP is deregistered, it will be unable to have its party name alongside its federal election candidates, robbing voters of the right to identify, and support, the candidates fighting for a mass movement of the working class to overturn the capitalist profit system.

The latest Labor-Coalition Electoral Legislation Amendment (Political Campaigner) Bill compels political campaign groups to register as a “significant third party” and declare their donors if their “electoral expenditure” rises above a threshold of \$250,000. That is a halving of the previous \$500,000 threshold.

The requirements are being applied retrospectively, forcing these groups to disclose donations associated with past activities, adding to an onerous burden of filing financial returns and being subjected to government auditing.

The term “electoral expenditure” is also vague and broad, and could extend to advocacy or awareness-raising on all political issues, rather than activities related to elections.

Organisations like the Australian Conservation Foundation, trade unions, groups backing independent candidates, and climate groups, such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition and Farmers for Climate Action, will have to declare their donors dating back for years.

As they did on the electoral laws in August, the Greens put on a show of protest. In the House of Representatives, Greens leader Adam Bandt said: “This is a dark day for democracy, not only because we here in this parliament are being denied the opportunity to debate a very bad bill, but also because this bill will restrict people's right to campaign.”

Bandt stated: “We expect it from this government, but what we don’t expect is that Labor will sign up to a dirty deal to ram through an anti-democratic piece of legislation on the last day of parliament.”

What a fraud! That is precisely what Labor did in August on the earlier electoral laws. At that time, the

Greens made similar remarks about the “dark day for democracy,” but have kept their mouths shut on the laws ever since.

Continuing that silence, Bandt again did not mention the party deregistration laws, nor did the party’s “democracy” spokesperson, Senator Larissa Waters.

While the Greens have claimed to oppose such “dirty deals,” they are seeking to form a post-election coalition government with Labor, or provide the numbers to keep a Labor government in office, as they did with the minority Gillard government from 2010 to 2013.

This is all under conditions of the continuing COVID-19 disaster—the worst global public health crisis for a century—the burden of which is being borne by working people, accelerating social inequality to a staggering level. This is creating deepening social and political discontent, and triggering strikes and protests, including by teachers and healthcare workers.

The Labor-Coalition offensive against democratic rights, and the complicity of the Greens, underscores the necessity to fight for the defeat of all the new electoral laws. We urge people to join up as electoral members of the SEP to help us retain our party registration so that we can take forward the fight for socialism on the broadest possible basis, including in elections.

It is no accident that 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 genuine socialism, which is based on the fully informed and active participation of the working class through a workers’ government.



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