

Australian government in disarray as workers' anger grows over pandemic disaster

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An extraordinary crisis is developing throughout the parliamentary establishment in Australia as the ongoing disaster of mass COVID-19 infections and rising deaths intensifies public hostility toward the Liberal-National Coalition government.

The political turmoil deepened this week as thousands of school students and teachers were infected in the first week of the reopening of schools in three states. At the same time, an average of around 80 people died every day—at least half in chronically under-staffed aged care homes. This is a direct result of the profit-driven “live with the virus” program of the government and its state and territory counterparts, both Coalition and Labor.

The worsening catastrophe has seen infections average about 65,000 a day in 2022, compared to 560 a day in 2021 and 2020, because these governments made deliberate decisions to dismantle safety measures and testing facilities just as the Omicron mutation took hold in December.

While media polls show collapsing support for Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government, it is not the only one culpable for this public health breakdown. The Labor Party has offered bipartisan support throughout the pandemic and the state and territory Labor governments have worked hand-in-glove with the Coalition via the “National Cabinet,” a de facto coalition government.

Anger, accompanied by calls for strikes, is rising throughout the working class, particularly among students, school teachers and staff, aged care workers and hospital staff who have been placed on the frontlines of this pandemic, threatening their lives and ongoing health, and that of their families and friends.

Nurses in New South Wales, the most populous state, are currently voting on holding a one-day strike on February 15 over staffing ratios and shortages, and aged care workers are planning to protest outside Canberra’s parliament house on Tuesday.

With federal parliament due to resume that day for the first time since early December, and an election due by May, Morrison’s government is in obvious disarray, torn apart by

leaked text messages and infighting.

In the latest episode reported last night, Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, the leader of the National Party, apologised to Morrison and offered to resign over a text last March in which he denounced Morrison as a long-time “hypocrite” and “liar.”

That politically calculated leak against Morrison was the second within days from within the highest levels of the government. On Tuesday, Morrison’s plan to use a speech at the National Press Club to “re-set” his government’s political pitch was derailed by leaked texts from an unnamed federal cabinet minister and a former New South Wales Liberal Premier labelling him a “fraud,” “a complete psycho” and a “horrible, horrible person.”

These texts and the corporate media’s promotion of them indicate mounting concern in ruling circles that Morrison’s government is incapable of suppressing the growing opposition in the working class and delivering the further economic restructuring and attacks on workers’ conditions demanded by the financial markets.

Yet, there are also fears in corporate circles that a Labor Party-led government would do no better. That is despite the repeated pledges made by Labor leader Anthony Albanese that Labor would work closely with the trade unions and business to actively exploit the pandemic to impose a new wave of such restructuring, emulating that implemented by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

Over the past two days, the *Australian Financial Review* published editorials voicing frustration with both Morrison and Albanese for failing to adopt “full-blooded structural reform,” such as further tax cuts for the wealthy, “productivity-enhancing workplace reform” and cuts to social programs like the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The newspaper pilloried the government for relying on massive handouts and record low interest rates to promise economic recovery, while shutting the borders to cheap immigrant labour.

Likewise, the Murdoch media’s *Australian* ran editorials accusing both the government and Labor of lacking any

concrete policies to achieve “productivity improvements.” While decrying the government’s performance, it voiced anxiety that Labor and the unions would not be able to contain workers’ demands for industrial action to win pay rises as inflation, now at 3.5 percent officially, continues to cut real wages.

Albanese responded by reiterating his pro-business vows, while trying to keep a lid on the unrest among workers by holding out the prospect of wage rises—provided they bow to the employers’ restructuring demands. Afforded an op-ed in the *Australian* yesterday, he proclaimed: “We can lift wages and profits and also create even more jobs if we make our economy more productive. Productivity growth is about squeezing more out of our existing resources. Productivity is at the centre of Labor’s plan for a better future for Australia.”

This is a warning that any Labor government, backed by the unions, will only seek to deepen the decades-long offensive on workers’ jobs, conditions and real wages that was pioneered by the Hawke and Keating governments and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) through their Accords of the 1980s and 1990s.

The fraud of Albanese’s wages pitch was illustrated when he was asked on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) breakfast television on Friday if a Labor government would support a pay rise for the severely-stressed and over-worked aged care workers, most of whom can barely subsist on \$21 to \$23 a hour. Albanese refused to do so, saying it was a matter for the Fair Work Commission, the pro-employer tribunal established by the last Labor government of Rudd and Gillard that has kept wages at such poverty levels.

So intense is the political crisis that discussions reportedly have been held within the ruling elite about postponing the election. That could mean holding voting for half the Senate in May, and delaying the House of Representatives vote, at least until September. Nine Network journalist Niki Savva, a long-time Liberal Party insider, told ABC radio on January 24 that this “nuclear option” was being canvassed, with COVID being offered as the pretext.

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

No one in the government has denied this report. While such a postponement would not violate the 1901 Constitution, it would be unprecedented and mark a step toward more openly anti-democratic forms of rule. If the pandemic can be cited as an “emergency” for delaying an

election, it could become the excuse for cancelling an election.

The overriding fear in the ruling class is that the election outcome will be a hung parliament where neither of the major parties can rule effectively under conditions of mounting opposition and action by the working class.

For the working class, there is no way forward within the increasingly rotted framework of parliamentary politics, which serves only the dictates of the money markets and the capitalist class as a whole.

Any conception by workers that merely voting out the incumbent government and replacing it with Labor would be an improvement would be dangerous. That would simply swap one representative of the capitalist class with another with identical policies. An entirely alternative perspective must be adopted which represents the interests of the working class in Australia and globally.

Only the Socialist Equality Party fights for a program of elimination of the pandemic and the prioritisation of health and lives over profits. This perspective can only be achieved on an international basis through the utilisation of the entire resources of society for the benefit of the population.

New organisations of working-class struggle, such as rank-and-file committees, must be built, totally independent of Labor and the pro-capitalist unions, to defend health and lives against the “let it rip” program of the corporate elite and its political servants.

The fact that the pandemic is worsening worldwide, creating the conditions for even more deadly mutations after Omicron, is an indictment of global capitalism itself. This crisis is not only triggering walkouts and protests by workers and students but a shift in thinking toward the need for a socialist alternative to the ever-more staggering social inequality, dangers of war and climate change produced by the profit system.

The Socialist Equality Party alone fights for that socialist perspective, which means completely overturning the existing political and economic order to establish workers’ governments, based on meeting social need, not corporate profit.



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