Labor Party wins South Australian election on back of COVID disaster

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The Labor Party regained office in South Australia in Saturday's state election by cynically profiting from the public concern and hostility produced by the disastrous and deadly "live with the virus" offensive.

After a four-year term in government in the state, the Liberal Party suffered a heavy defeat, dealing a blow to the prospects of the federal Liberal-National government surviving the impending national election, which must be held by mid-May.

According to media polls, which proved roughly accurate on election day, the Liberal primary vote plummeted straight after the reopening of the state's borders on November 23. That soon led to the COVID-19 pandemic taking off, just as it has done in every other state and territory.

Saturday's rout provides a limited picture of the political impact of the worsening COVID disaster across the country. Infections are again soaring, especially in schools. That is because the federal, state and territory governments, collaborating in the bipartisan National Cabinet, have allowed the Omicron BA.2 variant to spread like wildfire in order to reopen the economy for the sake of corporate profit.

Even though postal and pre-polling votes—about a quarter of the total—are still to be counted, Liberal Premier Steven Marshall conceded defeat early on Saturday night, once it became clear that Labor would hold at least 24 of the 47 seats in the state legislature. Several senior ministers lost their seats.

On the current figures, Labor could win up to 28 seats and the Liberals 14, with five independents. Labor gained an overall swing of 7.7 percentage points from its near-record low vote at the last state election in 2018, taking its primary vote to around 40 percent.

The Liberals fell by 3.4 points to under 35 percent. Labor gained mainly from the implosion of the centre-right SA Best party of former federal senator Nick Xenophon, which dropped by 14 points to 0.2 percent. The Greens also benefitted from that demise, gaining 3 percent to nearly 10 percent of the vote.

Some of Labor's biggest swings came in affluent previously "safe Liberal" seats in Adelaide, the state capital, such as 11.4 percent in Bragg, in the city's eastern suburbs, and 11.6 percent in Gibson, in the southern suburbs. By contrast, Labor's vote fell by 1.0 percent in Playford, a working-class electorate in the outer northern suburbs.

Labor, backed by the trade unions, largely won by default. It was able to capitalise on the collapse of support for the Liberals once the pandemic spiralled to unprecedented heights.

Before November, the state's people had suffered just over 1,000 infections throughout 2020 and 2021, due to safety restrictions, including one six-day lockdown implemented by the Marshall government under public pressure to protect the population from the global catastrophe.

Since November, cases and deaths have soared and are again resurging. On election eve, 4,274 new cases were officially reported despite low and unreliable testing numbers, as well as three fatalities including a man in his 20s and a woman in her 40s, taking the state's pandemic death toll to 231.

By election day, the number of active cases in the state had risen to 23,282, compared with 15,850 a week earlier. The number of people in hospital was 147, against 98 on March 12.

As a result of the return to face-to-face classes, more than 330 teachers are in quarantine as COVID-19 patients or close contacts. Hundreds of teachers and students were infected within three days after the school term began on January 31. The Labor-aligned Australian Education Union prevented industrial action by teachers, despite a two-thirds vote for a strike on the first day of term.

Working closely with the unions Labor supplied the Liberal government with bipartisan support in scrapping virtually all COVID safety measures, just as Labor has nationally. "The judgment that I made early, at the beginning of COVID was that I said I was going to be a constructive opposition leader," Labor leader Peter Malinauskas, now premier-elect, said.

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Despite this record, Labor hypocritically ran an election campaign almost solely focussed on the disastrous state of the public health system. Labor played on people's fear of waiting too long for an ambulance, promising to spend $1.15 billion over four years on 350 extra ambulance officers and paramedics, 300 nurses and 100 doctors.

A Labor campaign ad stated: "Lives are at risk and Steven Marshall isn't doing enough. At the coming election vote Labor like your life depends on it."

The Ambulance Employees Association SA channelled the anger of paramedics behind this campaign. Ambulances had "chalked" messages of protest on them saying "lives are at risk" under Marshall.

The public's fears are real. In the first week of January, ambulances arrived within the required response time for life-threatening cases in just 33 percent of cases. Yet this is the result of decades of cuts by Liberal and Labor governments alike, long before COVID.

When Labor was last in office, from 2002 to 2018, it slashed health spending, presided over rising levels of ambulance "ramping" (waiting in queues outside over-stretched public hospitals) and shut down hospitals, including the Adelaide General Repatriation Hospital. Malinauskas himself was a key minister in that government from 2016, and was the health minister from 2017 to 2018.

Malinauskas is a typical product of the Labor-union apparatus. He is a very right-wing former state secretary of the shop assistants union, the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association, which has a long record of enforcing cheap labour, especially for young casual workers, in partnership with the retail giants.

In his victory speech on Saturday night, Malinauskas said not a word about the COVID pandemic. Instead, he sent a clear message to big business that Labor would serve its interests. Malinauskas praised Marshall, who led a pro-business government, for his "significant contribution to his party and to our state." He hailed the Liberals as a vital part of the political system and said they "may be our adversary, but they are not our enemies."

Malinauskas reiterated that he believed in harnessing "capital and labour" to generate economic growth. That means suppressing the struggles of workers against the demands of employers for deeper cuts to jobs and conditions.

Like federal Labor leader Anthony Albanese, Malinauskas has identified himself with the pro-market restructuring imposed by the federal Labor governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, backed by the unions, in the 1980s and 1990s.

Malinauskas won support from Adelaide's business leaders while the Marshall government was increasingly beset by factional warfare similar to that wracking Morrison's government. Three conservative Liberal MPs split from the party, reducing the government to minority status, relying on the votes of independents.

On Sunday, Malinauskas said he had started talking to business leaders already and that his vision was of a government that worked closely with the private sector. "I said from the start I was going to be a pro-business Labor leader," he told a media conference.

Malinauskas's remarks are a warning of another Labor assault on workers. Led by Premier Mike Rann from 2002, then Jay Weatherill until 2018, the previous Labor government presided over ruthless corporate restructuring, especially after the 2008 global financial meltdown.

That included the 2017 closure of the last remaining auto assembly factory, the Elizabeth GM Holden plant, which had employed 4,500 workers in 2003. Labor and the unions stifled and shut down all resistance by workers to such job cuts and closures.

The SA election is yet another in which Labor has won substantial victories by falsely posturing as a defender of health and lives. In late 2020 and early 2021, Labor retained office in Queensland and Western Australia, with the Liberals reduced to a rump in the latter state after backing Morrison's demands for a lifting of travel restrictions.

The bitter experiences of working people with successive thoroughly pro-business Labor and Liberal governments, as in South Australia, underscore the necessity for a politically-conscious break from the Labor and union machines. The accelerating offensive against working-class lives, livelihoods and social conditions, intensified by the pandemic, staggering inequality and the drive to war, can be answered only by transforming the deepening disgust toward the political establishment into a struggle for a socialist and internationalist program based on protecting lives and meeting social and human need, not the profit dictates of the corporate ruling elite.

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