

Crisis election begins in Australia as major parties suppress discussion of key issues facing working class

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday called the Australian federal election, with polling day to take place on May 21. The short campaign, of roughly six weeks, is designed to limit political discussion as much as possible under conditions in which none of the parliamentary parties have anything to offer workers and young people.

Both Morrison's Liberal-National Coalition and the Labor Party opposition are waging campaigns based on mudslinging, pathetic personality politics and the vaguest generalities. This is all premised on bogus claims that Australia can escape the intensifying global breakdown of capitalism expressed in economic volatility, war and the reemergence of mass working-class struggles.

The election is being held amid the deepest crisis of the political establishment in decades. For months, Morrison's position as prime minister has been in doubt, with bitter factional warfare inside the Coalition. The conflicts even influenced the timing of the election, with Morrison having to wait to call it until after the High Court dismissed a legal challenge by Liberal members to candidate preselections he imposed upon the party in New South Wales.

Underlying the government meltdown is popular opposition to the "let it rip" COVID policies which have resulted in an unprecedented wave of infection since last December. This has intersected with anger over the abandonment of flood victims, as well as hostility building up over decades to the erosion of working class living standards and growing social inequality.

For its part, Labor is coming off its defeat in the last federal election of 2019, which had been dubbed an unloseable election for the party given widespread opposition to the Coalition. Labor's vote plummeted, especially in working-class areas, as ordinary people saw through the claims that Labor would provide a "fair go"

after decades of Labor governments presiding over the destruction of jobs and working conditions.

Anthony Albanese, who became Labor leader after the 2019 defeat, shifted the party even further to the right, ending any rhetorical attacks on social inequality. Instead, he has insisted that Labor is the party of "aspiration" and "productivity" in a clear pitch to the corporate elite and the ultra-wealthy.

For the past two years, Albanese has largely marched in lockstep with the government on all the substantive issues including the pro-business pandemic policies and a vast military build-up integrating Australia into the US-led preparations for war with China.

The vacuous and diversionary character of the official campaign and the lies upon which it is based were on full display in the comments of Morrison and Albanese yesterday.

Morrison acknowledged that the election was occurring in "a world that has never been more unstable since the time of the second world war... There's drought. There's floods. There's fire. There's pandemic. There is now war."

But Morrison asserted: "What we've demonstrated over these past three years is the ability to make those decisions that has ensured that Australia's recovery is leading the world."

To millions of workers, this can only sound like a cruel joke. The bipartisan "reopening" of the economy amid the Omicron wave has resulted in at least five million infections in four months. More than 4,000 people have lost their lives to COVID in 2022, twice the number as in the first two years of the pandemic. The election is being held under conditions of a new surge, of the even more infectious BA.2 variant, with over 50,000 infections per day.

In addition to being imperiled with infection, workers have been subjected to stepped-up business restructuring during the pandemic, including widespread wage freezes, greater rates of casual and “flexible” working hours and mass job cutting. Official inflation has hit 3.5 percent, with wage growth at 3 percent or less, while the price of many essentials has skyrocketed by 10 percent or more.

As in its March 29 federal budget, which included substantial cuts to health, education and other essential areas of social spending, the government is advancing the nostrums of Australian exceptionalism with hazy assertions that all will be well going forward.

In reality, central banks around the world, including the Reserve Bank of Australia, are preparing substantial interest rate hikes in response to the global economic turbulence. Any rate rise could tip hundreds of thousands of working-class families over the financial cliff. A recent survey by Canstar, a financial research company, found that around 11 million people are worried they will not be able to meet household costs. One-third cited housing as their biggest worry.

Albanese’s remarks consisted largely of advertising sound bites and slogans. “Australians deserve better,” he said. “This government doesn’t have an agenda for today, let alone a vision for tomorrow.” A Labor government would “stop the rorts” and advance “integrity ... decency ... compassion and courage.”

As a number of media commentators noted, Labor is running a “small target campaign.” Albanese has hardly put forward a concrete policy, instead seeking to capitalise on the widespread hostility to Morrison. “No more mistakes. No more excuses. No more Morrison,” he declared yesterday.

Labor has not put forward any measures to address the cost of living and wages crisis. Albanese has pledged to bring businesses and unions together to boost “productivity and profits.” He has fraudulently claimed that this will trickle down into increased pay for workers. In reality, the union-business collaboration he is touting would be aimed at deepening economic restructuring, through the gutting of the remaining working conditions and stepped-up exploitation.

One of the few substantive attacks Albanese made on Morrison was over the national debt, which is set to surpass one trillion dollars over the coming year. Labor is pitching itself to the corporate elite as being a better vehicle for “budget repair.” This will inevitably take the form of sweeping cuts to social spending, whichever party forms office, as the working class is forced to pay for the

hundreds of billions of dollars handed to the corporations during the pandemic.

Albanese is similarly presenting Labor as better placed to collaborate with the US administration of President Joe Biden in aggressive military confrontations with Russia and, above all, China. Labor has insisted that military spending must increase from its already record level of more than half a trillion dollars this decade. It has backed every US provocation against Russia in the Ukraine crisis while issuing bellicose denunciations of China.

In other words, on the key issues facing the working class—war, austerity and the pandemic—the major parties are as one. The Greens are appealing to Labor for a power-sharing arrangement, while the various right-wing populists are seeking to divert widespread anger into the reactionary channels of nationalism.

The official lineup was exemplified by the bipartisan passage of anti-democratic electoral laws last September. They trebled the requirement for registration for parties that do not have parliamentary representation from 500 members to 1,500, under conditions of a pandemic surge that prevented most forms of political campaigning. This was a transparent attempt by Labor and the Coalition to clear the ballot ahead of the election and block workers from accessing any alternative.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and at least 12 other parties have been deregistered as a consequence.

The SEP will nevertheless stand candidates, to raise in the working class the vital issues that are being buried in the official campaign and to provide them with a socialist perspective. The SEP’s candidates will be compelled to appear on the ballot without party identification due to the anti-democratic deregistration.

The SEP will publish an election statement in the coming days outlining a fighting socialist program of action for the working class as it enters into struggle against the consequences of inflation and wage suppression, austerity and the drive to war. We appeal to all WSWs readers to support the SEP’s campaign, promote it on social media and get involved.

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