

Australian elections: Behind mudslinging and diversion, Labor and Liberals pledge stepped-up attacks on the working class

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The first week of the Australian election campaign has been characterised by mudslinging and personality politics on the part of the ruling Liberal-National Coalition and the opposition Labor Party. The media has been preoccupied with ridiculous “fact-checking” exercises and obsessive coverage of “gaffes” by politicians. The official campaign is more banal and devoid of serious discussion than any before.

However, behind the endless diversions, meant to disorient and wear down the population, is a parallel campaign. The audience for this is not ordinary people, but the ruling class.

When they address the public, Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor leader Anthony Albanese lyngly claim that Australia is on the cusp of an “economic recovery” that will benefit all. In the pages of the financial press, however, they acknowledge that world capitalism has entered into its deepest crisis in eighty years, and that the period ahead will be one of social, economic and geopolitical turbulence.

Under these conditions, the incoming government, whichever party prevails in the election, will be the most right-wing in Australia’s history. Like its counterparts internationally, its policies will be dictated by the profit imperatives of finance capital, in Australia and internationally, amid the global crisis.

This is demonstrated by what Albanese and Morrison have said when addressing themselves to the financial elite and the military-intelligence establishment, the true constituency of their parties.

Both are pitching themselves as the most reliable instrument to enforce a stepped-up offensive against the social rights of the working class, to impose policies benefiting the corporations and the ultra-wealthy, and to deepen Australia’s frontline role in the US preparations for war with Russia, and above all China.

Both, moreover, insist that the “economy” must remain “open,” as millions of workers and young people, including school children, are imperilled with COVID infection,

illness and death for the foreseeable future to ensure that there is no disruption to corporate profit-making activities.

In the first seven days of the campaign:

* Labor has ditched a promise for an “independent review” into raising the JobSeeker unemployment allowance and has insisted that it has no plans to increase the sub-poverty payment. At the same time, Albanese and other party leaders have declared that under no circumstances would a Labor government reverse the Coalition’s “stage three” tax cuts, benefitting the country’s wealthiest individuals.

* Albanese has stated that a government he leads will “turn back” refugee boats on the high seas, an illegal abrogation of the right to seek asylum and a policy that will result in deaths. Albanese said Labor would maintain “offshore detention facilities” in the Pacific, where refugees are imprisoned indefinitely for years.

* In a feature interview with the *Murdoch Daily Telegraph*, Albanese declared that “China is a threat to our security...Whoever is in government, there will be a difficult relationship with China going forward and that is because China has changed.” This was a clear pledge that Labor would march in lockstep with the US government’s war drive against Beijing, aimed at ensuring American imperialist hegemony.

* In the same *Telegraph* interview, Albanese said that a Labor government would not prevent the construction of more coal mines, in a statement of fealty to the mining barons that exposes Labor’s posturing on the issue of climate change as hot air.

The various right-wing policy statements are a deepening of a protracted pitch by Albanese since he was installed as Labor leader following the party’s debacle in the 2019 federal election. Albanese promised that Labor would dispense with any rhetorical condemnations of social inequality and insisted that it was a party of “wealth creation” and “productivity,” code words for corporate

profit.

This unalloyed pro-business line is not the result primarily of Albanese's individual proclivities. It merely formalises Labor's decades-long role as a party of the banks and the corporations that has no connection to the working class whatsoever.

To the extent that the Coalition raised any substantive issues in the opening stages of the campaign, it was to tout their "economic credentials." A Coalition government, senior ministers stated, would focus on "budget repair" and a transition to "economic recovery."

The essence of this program is sweeping cuts to social spending to pay for the almost one trillion dollars in national debt, much of it accrued through massive handouts to the corporations during the pandemic. The agenda was mapped out in the pre-election budget, which included cuts to healthcare, education and other areas of vital social spending, together with a major increase to the military budget.

Morrison has also stated that a re-elected Coalition government would return to "industrial relations reform." This is in line with a key demand of the corporate elite, for the end of any, even nominal restraints on pro-business restructuring, workforce casualisation and ever-deeper wage cuts.

Most of the Coalition's industrial relations measures failed to get through the last parliament. This was not the result of any substantive opposition from Labor, or the corporatised trade unions. Instead, various crossbench parliamentarians were fearful that passing the widely unpopular measures would jeopardise their political fortunes.

The same issue looms large in the present election. The virtually identical policies of Labor and the Coalition are deeply unpopular, together with those parties themselves.

The gulf between working people and the official campaign was stark in its first week. Morrison set off on a whirlwind tour of the country. Journalists who accompanied him, however, said that the prime minister did not encounter a single genuine voter, instead meeting with small-business people and carefully vetted Liberal supporters. Morrison's minders are terrified that any encounters between him and ordinary people would result in angry denunciations.

Albanese too "campaignned" among Labor supporters, small-business people and Labor members in the trade unions. His one mass appearance, at the Byron Bay Bluesfest music event over the weekend, ended in fiasco with Albanese's remarks drowned out by boos.

Polling over the weekend showed that neither major party is on track to form a majority government. The only category of voters that registered a clear increase in the poll, conducted by Resolve, were those who are "undecided" with

the cohort growing from 21 percent of the electorate a fortnight ago to 27 percent. Polling by Roy Morgan last week showed almost a third of voters were considering supporting a "minor" party or independent.

The disillusionment is particularly sharp in the major working-class areas of the state capitals. Alongside decades of attacks on jobs, wages and social conditions, enforced above all by Labor and the unions, this is the product of a rapid development of the social crisis.

While the latest unemployment figure sits at four percent, the rate in the south-west of Sydney is above nine percent, compared with lows of one percent in wealthier areas. The real numbers are far-higher than the understated official figures, which count people as employed even if they work one hour a week on a casual basis. The cost of living is soaring. Even the official inflation rate, which downplays the crisis, is above wage growth.

After the first week of the campaign, the corporate media is full of commentary voicing the terror of the financial elite over the prospect of a hung parliament or a minority government. The fear is that such a government would be incapable of carrying out the pro-business restructuring and cuts to social conditions that are demanded.

In this context, the Greens are centring their campaign on appeals for a power-sharing arrangement with a minority Labor government. Contrary to the Greens' claims, such a government would do nothing to resolve the environmental crisis, while ruling in the interests of the rich and deepening Australia's alignment with the US-led war drive.

The first week of the campaign has underscored the fact that the official parliamentary parties have nothing to offer workers and young people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing candidates to provide a genuine alternative. The SEP's election statement, published last week, outlines the key issues in the campaign that are being suppressed by the major parties. Above all, it advances a fighting socialist program of action for the growing sections of the working class entering into struggle against the "let it rip" COVID policies, social inequality, austerity and war. Sign-up to the SEP campaign today!

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