

# Australia's still-minority Labor government rushes to commit to war and austerity

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Votes are still being counted from Saturday's crisis-wracked Australian election, and it remains unclear whether the Labor Party can even form a majority government.

The election delivered what is being described as a "seismic" shock to the political establishment. The widespread hostility in the working class and other layers of the population, which has developed over decades, produced the lowest combined vote in history for Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, the two parties on which capitalist rule has rested since World War II.

Five Labor ministers were quickly sworn in as an interim government yesterday, even though Labor's vote fell to a new record low of less than 33 percent. Never before has an Australian government been installed on the back of such a low and declining vote.

Despite the efforts of the corporate media, spearheaded by the Murdoch outlets, to preempt the vote counting by claiming that Labor is likely to gain the 76 seats needed for a majority in the House of Representatives, that outcome remains far from certain.

An especially fragile "hung" parliament remains a distinct possibility, with Labor depending on guarantees of "confidence and supply" from the Greens and a dozen or so independents, including business-backed "Teal" independents, who represent by far the wealthiest electorates in the country.

Five existing members of this parliamentary "crossbench" rushed on Sunday to give such assurances to the new government and Greens leader Adam Bandt appealed for stability, saying "we must work together."

Far from all the media hype about an "inclusive and diverse" parliament, these elements are scurrying to shore up the new government, even as it reiterates its commitment to the intensifying US-led war drive against China and to budget-slashing austerity measures.

Anxious to prove their worth to the ruling class, newly-appointed Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his four interim co-ministers are moving with extraordinary haste to begin to implement the anti-working-class agenda demanded of them by Washington and the corporate elite.

Just three hours after being sworn-in by the governor-general in Canberra, Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong boarded a plane to fly to Tokyo for a meeting of the

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), a US-led alliance directed at militarily and economically preventing China from challenging US global hegemony.

Before taking off, in his very first press conference as prime minister, Albanese said the rushed visit to the Quad meeting, which includes Japan and India, was needed to "send a message to the world." Above all, the new government was committed to "the relationship with the United States" as "our most important."

While he was in the air, Albanese received what media commentators termed his first "national security test." The Biden administration gave its most forthright statement yet of its preparation for a potentially catastrophic nuclear war against China.

At a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo, President Joe Biden declared "yes," when asked if Washington would intervene militarily against any Chinese attempt to take Taiwan by force. For the second time in eight months, Biden abandoned the decades-old US policy of "strategic ambiguity" on its readiness to go to war over the island, which is internationally recognised as a part of China.

In Tokyo, Albanese reiterated his commitment to the AUKUS military pact with the UK and US against China, including the acquisition of long-range attack nuclear submarines. During the flight to Japan, Albanese had a phone call with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to underscore that pledge.

Also on top of the agenda was the White House's fury that the outgoing Coalition government permitted Solomon Islands to sign a vague security agreement with China. During the election campaign, Albanese and Wong denounced the agreement as the worst strategic "failure" since World War II, emphasising Labor's credentials as the creator and staunchest defender of the US military alliance.

As a statement of intent, Albanese and Wong are accompanied on their trip by Defence Department secretary Greg Moriarty, who served outgoing Defence Minister Peter Dutton as he declared the need to "prepare for war" against China, and Office of National Intelligence chief Andrew Shearer, a prominent anti-China "hawk."

In Tokyo, Albanese will sign up Australia to a new US-led

Asia-Pacific economic bloc aimed at isolating China as much as possible. The 13-member “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity” is a blatant bid to assert US power, without giving regional countries any new access to US markets. The White House said it would enable the US and its allies “to decide on rules of the road that ensure American workers, small businesses, and ranchers can compete in the Indo-Pacific.”

Before leaving Australia, Albanese had a lengthy phone conversation with Biden as the US president flew from the US to South Korea ahead of the Quad. According to media reports, the pair struck up an “easy familiarity,” after a previous meeting when Biden was Barack Obama’s vice-president.

Albanese was a senior minister in the last Labor government, which signed up to Obama’s “pivot to Asia” to confront China, and agreed to the basing of US marines in the strategic northern Australian city of Darwin.

In today’s *Australian*, former strategic think tank chief Peter Jennings noted that the AUKUS submarine project would cost “a huge amount of money, enough to lift Australian defence spending from 2 percent to 3 percent of gross national product.”

Those many billions of dollars, on top of the \$600 billion already allocated to military spending this decade, will be paid for by further cutting the social services and living standards of the working class.

To underscore Labor’s priorities, Albanese told his inaugural press conference that his interim ministry’s National Security Committee and Expenditure Review Committee would meet on Wednesday, as soon as he returned from Japan. That highlights the reality that war abroad means class war at home to extract the required sacrifices from workers.

In interviews with the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review*, the new Treasurer Jim Chalmers and Finance Minister Katy Gallagher wasted no time in affirming Labor’s intention to be a “pro-business” government and one that would tackle the budget deficits and near-trillion dollar debt left by the multi-billion handouts to business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, Albanese defended Labor’s commitment to deliver the huge income tax cuts that it helped the Coalition government legislate. By Treasury calculations, this will give wealthy households annual tax cuts of up to \$23,280, slashing government revenues by more than \$300 billion over 10 years. As the same time everyone trying to survive on poverty-line social security payments, such as aged and disability pensioners, carers and the unemployed, will get nothing.

The government already confronts an escalating cost-of-living crisis that will trigger more strikes and protests by workers, on top of those that erupted during the election campaign involving nurses, other health workers, aged care workers, teachers, university staff, bus drivers and others.

Prices for essentials, such as food, housing and petrol—now

over \$2 a litre, despite a temporary fuel excise cut—are rising far faster than wages, and this deepening real wage cut is magnified by rising interest rates on the record levels of mortgage and other household debt. Poverty and homelessness are soaring.

The Albanese government will rely, above all, on the trade unions to stifle and suppress workers’ opposition, as they have increasingly since the Accords and anti-strike enterprise bargaining system they imposed under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996.

Business leaders voiced their support for Albanese’s plan to quickly convene a government-employer-union “employment summit.” Under the false flag of “bringing the country together,” Labor and the unions will seek to subordinate workers to their corporate-backed demand for higher “productivity.”

Representing the largest companies, Business Council chief executive Jennifer Westacott said: “We welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment throughout the campaign to working alongside businesses to deliver a private sector-led recovery.” She called for changes to “workplace relations” to “lift productivity,” echoing Albanese’s pitch to big business throughout the election.

That means a further employer-government-union offensive against the jobs, wages and conditions of workers to boost profits, as the Socialist Equality Party warned in our election statement. In that statement, we advanced a socialist program of action for workers to fight for their class interests against the relentless assault on their basic social and democratic rights.

That program of working-class demands, and the building of rank-and-file committees to fight for them, provides an essential way forward against the reactionary agenda of the Labor government, the unions and all those trying to bolster this government.



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