The international significance of Australia's crisis election

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The Australian federal election on Saturday has revealed an historic crisis of the two-party set-up that has been in existence since the end of World War II.

Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, the principal political props of capitalist rule, registered their lowest combined result in history, at around 68.5 percent of primary votes. An unprecedented number of ballots, almost a third, were cast for independent and "minor" party candidates.

The vote makes clear why Labor and the Coalition joined hands late last year to pass anti-democratic electoral laws that deregistered more than a dozen minor parties, including the Socialist Equality Party. The laws were a preemptive strike against the mass support that could be won by an alternative perspective, especially a socialist program advancing the interests of the working class.

The very future of the Liberal Party, and of its coalition with the regional-based Nationals, has been called into question. For its part, the incoming Labor government is tasked with imposing sweeping austerity measures and escalating Australian involvement in the US drive to war with China, under conditions in which it has no popular mandate and its base of support in the working class has disintegrated.

The outcome presages further political shocks and upheavals. Above all, it reflects, in distorted electoral terms, a political radicalisation of workers and young people that is already beginning to find expression in the development of working class struggles.

The result has not only immense domestic implications, but an international significance. For decades, Australia has been presented as an island continent of relative political and social stability, far removed from the political turmoil and social struggle of Europe, the US and Asia.

These Australian exceptionalist nostrums have always been based upon mythmaking. Their function has been to divide Australian workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally, and to keep them shackled within the political structures that defend capitalism, above all Labor and the trade unions.

But now, the claims that Australia is "the lucky country"—always a political fraud—are simply untenable. The political establishment, no less than its counterparts around the world, is being roiled by the deepest crisis of global capitalism in 80 years. And the working class is passing through immense social experiences that are undeniably connected to international developments and that directly parallel the plight of workers all over the globe.

The past differences between the capitalist parties, whether social-democratic or conservative, have eroded in Australia, as everywhere. Regardless of what they call themselves, the parties of the ruling establishment are committed to the COVID policies of mass infection and death, sweeping austerity to force the working class to pay for the economic downturn and corporate bailouts, and militarism and war aimed at pursuing predatory imperialist interests and at offsetting domestic crises.

This process was on stark display throughout the election, during which there was no substantive difference between Labor and the Coalition. To the extent that there was a contest, it was over which party could best serve the interests of the financial elite and the military-intelligence establishment by imposing policies that are opposed by the overwhelming majority of the population.

Labor and the Coalition tried to revive Australian exceptionalism. They declared that the pandemic was over and claimed the country was on the cusp of a miraculous economic recovery. These assertions, completely contradicted by the situation confronting working people, were taken seriously only by the affluent upper classes and a corrupted, pliant media.

Try as they might, the major parties could not exclude the major international issues. Amid the campaign, the COVID pandemic intensified, resulting in around 50,000 infections a day, one of the highest per capita rates in the world, and over 40 deaths. More than 6,000 lives have been lost in 2022 as a result of the bipartisan "let it rip" policies unleashed last December.

The social crisis also came to the fore. Official inflation hit 5.1 percent during the campaign, the highest level in 30 years, while the true cost of living is rising far more rapidly. Neither Labor nor the Coalition advanced a single policy to address the crisis. They joined hands in support of income tax cuts for the wealthy, ruled out any increase to wages and rejected demands for an increase to sub-poverty level welfare payments.

The issue of war also loomed large. Australia has been at the centre of a US military build-up directed against China for more than a decade. But Labor, the Coalition and the media maintained a conspiracy of silence aimed at keeping the population in the dark about the real agenda being pursued on behalf of US imperialism and the corporate elite.

Under conditions where the US is already engaged in a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine and is seeking to provoke a direct

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clash with China, the issue could no longer be buried. In auditioning for the role as the most reliable partner of the Biden administration, Labor and the Coalition unveiled one increase to military spending after another. Both declared that it was necessary to "prepare for war" with China, while insisting that they were best placed to oversee these mad plans, which could result in a third world war.

The war hysteria, however, did not resonate, nor did any other policy of the major parties. To the extent that elections provide a limited window into popular sentiment, the 2022 result demonstrated a widespread rejection of Labor and the Coalition.

Labor's base disintegrates

Most significant was the continuing fall in Labor's primary vote. It is beneath 33 percent, the lowest level since 1934 and down 0.5 percent on the previous low in the 2019 election.

Under conditions of mass hostility to Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the disintegration of his government, Labor could not increase its support in the working class. This demonstrates that its 2019 defeat was not a product of tactical errors, as Labor claimed, but reflected a historic rupture with its previous base in the working class.

This is the product not just of Labor's unalloyed pro-business pitch, but of decades during which it has functioned as the chief enforcer of cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, in league with the trade unions.

Labor's vote in the key working class seats of Sydney and Melbourne stagnated or declined further. The party primarily picked up support in more affluent electorates and in Western Australia, where the result expressed popular hostility to Morrison's role in spearheading the lifting of successful COVID suppression measures.

In some working class electorates, right-wing populist parties, such as the United Australia Party (UAP), picked up close to 10 percent of the vote. But the UAP's vote totals are a modest return on the $100 million it spent during the campaign.

The Greens won support in certain inner-city electorates, above all in Brisbane and Melbourne, but their vote remained low in working class areas.

"Teal" independents, who are entering the incoming parliament in record numbers, stood exclusively in wealthy, blue-ribbon Liberal seats. Their emergence does not reflect the developing movement of the working class, but the aspirations of an affluent layer of the professional upper-middle class, which combines posturing over the climate and feminist identity politics with "clean energy" investment and "fiscal conservatism" committed to the profits of the corporate elite.

In other words, the result reflected the complete disenfranchisement of working people within the existing political set-up.

Desperate efforts are being undertaken to paper over the chasm between the working class and the political establishment. The Murdoch media, together with a host of establishment figures, rushed to proclaim a majority Labor government on Sunday, when only a fraction of the vote had been counted. Labor leader Anthony Albanese was sworn in as prime minister on Monday morning, in record speed. But days later, it is still not clear that his government will have a 76-seat majority.

In addition to papering over the historic crisis of the parliamentary set-up, the speed of Albanese's installation reflects the agenda that his Labor government will seek to impose in the interests of the ruling elite. Having run a pro-business "small target" campaign, featuring hardly any policy announcements, Albanese has been a flurry of activity since the weekend, proving that his government will be among the most right-wing in Australian history.

On Monday, Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong hastened to Japan to join a meeting of the Quad, a de facto military alliance of the US, Australia, India and Japan directed against China. Immediately after US President Joe Biden declared that his administration was prepared to go to war with China over Taiwan, Albanese pledged his commitment to US provocations and threats in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the social front, Treasurer Jim Chalmers has declared that Labor faces "dire" economic challenges and will press ahead with "debt reduction," i.e., austerity measures. It will convene a summit with big business and the trade unions within months to plan stepped-up pro-business restructuring directed against workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

And just three days after the election, Labor presided over the "turn back" of a boat of Sri Lankan refugees, illegally violating the right to seek asylum.

In other words, the government's program is reaction all down the line: war abroad, a war against the social rights of the working class at home and the continuing evisceration of democratic rights.

This program will produce mass opposition, which has already been foreshadowed in the election result. Strikes by nurses, bus drivers, aged care workers, teachers and university staff erupted during the election despite the efforts of the unions to suppress them. That is an anticipation of what is to come.

This emerging movement requires a political perspective and a leadership, because anger and opposition alone are not enough. That is the essential significance of the election campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party. Its candidates alone told the truth: that the election would solve nothing for working people, and that the key issue is the development of an independent movement of the working class against the entire political establishment and capitalism.

The SEP advanced a socialist program of action for the working class to fight war, austerity, the "live with the virus" offensive and the cost-of-living crisis. Under conditions in which every one of these crises will be intensified by the new Labor government, this program takes on even greater significance. We urge workers and young people seeking to fight for a future to contact the SEP today and take your place in the struggle for international socialism.

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