

Ex-Australian Labor MP joins anti-immigrant One Nation

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Just weeks before the March 25 election in the Australian state of New South Wales, a former longtime state Labor frontbench member of parliament last week announced her defection to the far-right One Nation party.

Tania Mihailuk, whom the Labor Party has endorsed as the MP for the Sydney working-class electorate of Bankstown since 2011, and before that as mayor of Bankstown from 2006, said she would stand as a One Nation candidate for the state's upper house.

While particularly disgusting, Mihailuk's turn to the anti-immigrant and anti-welfare party founded by Senator Pauline Hanson in 1997 is not unprecedented. Having quit the Labor Party last year, Mihailuk is following the political footsteps of ex-federal Labor Party leader Mark Latham, who joined One Nation in 2018.

In fact, Mihailuk wants to join Latham in the NSW upper house, where he picked up a seat in 2019, along with a second One Nation candidate, by obtaining 6.9 percent of the statewide vote.

Hanson has long agitated against indigenous people, welfare recipients, "Asians" and Muslims. She was first elevated to media prominence to exploit the widespread disaffection with the attacks on working-class jobs and conditions conducted by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and the trade unions from 1983 to 1997.

After regaining a parliamentary seat in 2016, one of Hanson's provocations was to enter the Senate chamber in 2017 wearing the full-length Islamic headdress in a bid to whip up anti-Muslim prejudice.

Increasingly, Hanson also has spouted anti-Chinese poison and pro-war militarism. In her first Senate speech in 2016, she claimed Australia was being taken over by the "oppressive communist" Chinese government via land and asset purchases, the kind of "foreign takeover" that Australians had fought and died in wars to prevent.

Latham himself has a long record, including as Labor leader from 2003 to 2005, as an unabashed advocate of slashing social spending in line with the requirements of global capitalism. Under the slogans of "user pays,"

"individual responsibility" and getting people to "work hard" in order to "climb" the supposed "ladder of opportunity," as Labor leader he championed the junking of the post-World War II welfare state.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Latham has played a prominent role in One Nation's efforts to energise a far-right base by railing against public health measures, such as lockdowns and vaccination mandates, that affected business interests. In mid-2020, Latham claimed that concerns about coronavirus infection and death were the result of "media hysteria." He and Hanson fuelled the agitation that was subsequently embraced by the criminal "live with the virus" policy of all the state and federal governments.

Mihailuk's switch to One Nation is most notable because Bankstown is among the most immigrant and ethnically diverse working-class communities in Australia. Over 60 different languages are spoken by its population, nearly two-thirds of whom were born overseas.

After decades of being represented by Labor MPs at federal and state level, including former Prime Minister Paul Keating in the 1980s and 1990s, Bankstown remains one of the most impoverished areas of the country. Close to 40 percent of its residents are classified as low income (earning less than \$500 per week), the official unemployment rate is 7.2 percent, more than double the national average, and youth unemployment (15- to 24-year-olds) is as high as 40-60 percent in some neighbourhoods.

Like Hanson and Latham, Mihailuk represents efforts to develop more right-wing, nationalist and racially divisive political formations to divert rising class and social discontent in reactionary channels. Popular support is continuing to implode for Australia's two traditional ruling parties, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition, after years of declining working and living conditions, now aggravated by the COVID pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis unleashed by the federal Labor government.

The looming NSW election may produce another record low vote for the twin parties of capitalist rule, following last May's federal election, which saw their combined vote fall

to the worst level since World War II. Labor's vote dropped to 33 percent, but it scraped into office because the Coalition's support declined even further.

Mihailuk was a member of Labor's shadow state cabinet, and had held key portfolios, such as natural resources, planning, family and community services and social housing. She resigned from Labor last year, ostensibly over her allegations of corruption against a factional Labor Party rival, current Canterbury-Bankstown mayor Khal Asfour.

After state Labor leader Chris Minns dumped her from the shadow cabinet for making her accusations in a parliamentary speech last September, she quit the party in October, declaring that it was "plagued by corruption." Her allegations against Asfour included that he used his position as mayor to aid former Labor Party powerbroker and MP Eddie Obeid with a property redevelopment application.

Asfour was cleared by a party investigation but last Friday stood down as an upper house candidate after the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, a Murdoch tabloid, reported personal expenses he claimed on a 2015 mayoral trip to Japan.

Mihailuk's accusations reprised the stench of corruption that surrounded the Labor Party in NSW before its most recent term of office in that state ended in a landslide defeat in 2011. Across the state, the most populous in the country, Labor received only 25.5 percent of the vote, its lowest result since 1904.

Labor's 16 years in government had been marked by blatant venality, cronyism and nepotism, privatisation of electricity and other services, and cosy relations with major investment banks, property developers and speculators.

Mihailuk's One Nation announcement, posted on its website, outlined her far-right views. She said NSW would go "woke and broke" under a Labor government. "I know the true agenda of the people currently sitting on Chris Minns' front bench—they are from the extreme left," she stated.

In reality, Minns and his shadow ministers personify Labor's right-wing, pro-business character and agenda. They have maintained close bipartisan support for the program of the current hated Liberal-National state premier Dominic Perrottet, including the profit-driven dismantling of COVID safety measures in partnership with the federal Labor government, and defended Perrottet after he "apologised" for wearing a Nazi uniform to his 21st birthday party in 2003.

Mihailuk identified herself with the corporate elite, including the coal and energy conglomerates, while making populist pitches. One Nation was the "only party" focused on the cost-of-living crisis and energy bills, while the two ruling parties were creating an "unnecessary scare campaign

against coal and nuclear energy." She claimed: "Labor wants to ban coal and forestry and this will send electricity prices and the cost of building materials to record highs."

This was combined with an appeal to a bigoted Christian constituency. As a "proud Christian," she cited "freedom of religion" as another reason for joining One Nation. Labor, she declared, "want drug legalisation and gender fluidity teaching in schools," along with "left wing indoctrination," instead of "actual common sense skills that lead to jobs."

Jihad Dib, Labor's MP for the adjoining Lakemba electorate, and now its candidate to replace Mihailuk in Bankstown, desperately sought to repair the damage done to Labor. He said he was "shocked" by her defection. "People in our diverse and multicultural community will be bitterly disappointed that she has joined a political party with division and fear at its core."

In fact, Mihailuk's embrace of Hanson and Latham has a political logic. It is entirely in keeping with Labor's founding "White Australia" policy—a racist program shared with the trade union leaders to divide workers in Australia from their fellow workers across Asia and internationally.

Despite "White Australia's" supposed ditching in the 1960s because of Australian capitalism's growing dependence on Asian markets, this "anti-foreigner" program has remained central to the policies of Labor and the unions, and has been brought to the fore during every period of economic breakdown and war.

Mihailuk's recruitment to the Hanson-Latham union is another warning of intense efforts being made within the ruling class to fashion new far-right, nationalist and xenophobic political formations and push the whole parliamentary establishment further in that direction. This is in line with the elevation of far-right and fascist parties in Europe, the US and elsewhere, blaming immigrants for the social crisis produced by the profit system.

Mihailuk's trajectory is another demonstration of the necessity for workers and young people to consciously reject Labor's nationalism and defence of the corporate profit system, which is a breeding ground for such political poison. They need to join the fight to build a new revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class, uniting workers of all backgrounds worldwide in the common struggle to overturn the entire disastrous capitalist order.



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