

Australia: After media lies about a Labor landslide, NSW election likely to result in minority government

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27 March 2023

Within hours of the closing of the polls for the New South Wales (NSW) state election on Saturday, corporate journalists rushed to proclaim a “landslide” Labor victory. Early in the evening, the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) declared that Labor would form a majority government.

Those assertions have now been exposed as misinformation, aimed at bolstering the stability of the widely-discredited two-party set-up.

Three days into the count, it now appears clear that Labor will be a minority in the Legislative Assembly, the lower house of the state parliament. It will depend on support from independent and Green MPs to pass legislation. A mishmash of independents, Greens and right-wing populists will also hold the balance of power in the Legislative Council, the upper house.

As of this writing, seven lower house seats remain in doubt. Labor is ahead in only two of them, Kiama and Ryde. But election analysts tip that Kiama will be secured by independent Gareth Ward. With Labor still on 45 seats, even a victory in Ryde would see it fall short of the 47 seats required to form a wafer-thin majority.

The ABC’s lead election analyst, Antony Green, is now predicting a minority Labor government, with either 45 or 46 seats. Other analysts have similarly given up on the prospect of a majority government.

The turnaround is a case study in how the media not only fails to report the news objectively, but in many instances simply makes it up. There was no factual basis for the breathless assertions on Saturday, continuing into Sunday, that Labor had secured a majority. Instead, the media essentially adopted Labor’s own fraudulent election slogan of a “fresh start” after 12 years of Liberal-National Coalition government.

In fact, by all metrics, Labor’s victory was always going to be slim. As in all previous recent elections in Australia, the defining feature was the collapse of the Liberal primary

vote, which declined by 4.7 percent. But the statewide swing to Labor was just 3.7 percent, off historic low votes which saw it lose the 2019 election.

The media operation recalled the one carried out after last May’s federal election. Then, the media proclaimed a majority Labor victory, days before it was clear. In fact, Labor had recorded its lowest primary vote since 1934, and only snuck into office on the back of the implosion of the Liberal vote. The decline in Labor’s vote was particularly sharp in working-class areas.

The premature declarations of a Labor federal majority, spearheaded by the right-wing Murdoch media, was motivated by definite political considerations.

First, it was an attempt to cover-up the historic crisis of the two-party system, through which the capitalist class has ruled for the past 80 years. Second, it sought to create the conditions for the Labor government to get on with implementing the agenda demanded by the ruling elite. That was for an immediate and dramatic escalation of Australia’s frontline role in the US preparations for war with China, and the imposition of sweeping austerity measures.

Similar calculations underlay the hype over Labor’s NSW election victory. The vote again revealed, in its own way, a significant crisis of the major parties. Labor’s vote fell in several key working-class electorates.

Labor was able to pick up some support on the basis of the hostility of public sector workers to attacks on their pay and conditions by the previous Coalition government. But the largest swings to Labor appear to have been among wealthier layers of the population, again underscoring its character as a pro-business outfit that has lost its previous base in the working class.

And as at the federal level, Labor is tasked with implementing a deeply unpopular agenda. Front and centre is the need for “budget repair,” i.e., austerity. The deficit for this financial year is expected to be over \$12 billion. As in all the other states and federally, the vast handouts to big

business during the first two years of the pandemic must now be extracted from working people through cuts to education, healthcare and other key areas of social spending.

The scale of the cuts, moreover, must be ever-greater. The vast military-build up being presided over by the federal Labor government, including the \$368 billion purchase of nuclear-powered AUKUS submarines, means that the federal share of funding for social services will continually decline.

To press ahead with this program, NSW Labor leader Chris Minns was hastily sworn in today, even though the election result remains unclear.

In Minns and his Labor government, the ruling elite has a very shaky instrument. Minns is a lifelong careerist politician, associated with right-wing free market policies. A backroom factional fighter, he is often visibly uncomfortable when compelled to state an opinion publicly.

That is one of the reasons Prime Minister Anthony Albanese attended NSW Labor's Saturday evening victory event. Albanese, seeking to shore-up the new government, improbably described Minns as a "great leader" with "vision, compassion and integrity."

Labor, moreover, contested the election on a virtual unity ticket with the widely-despised Coalition government. Minns emphasised his agreement with all the Coalition's key policies. That included the profit-driven ending of COVID safety measures, which resulted in at least 22,000 deaths across the country last year, and the need for stepped up "productivity" and wage restraint in the public sector.

Minns refrained from criticising the hated Coalition Premier Dominic Perrottet on any issue. After the election, Minns thanked Perrottet and proclaimed the campaign, where all substantive questions were suppressed, as a model to be emulated.

But Labor's narrow victory will not quell a growing movement of the working class. That was expressed in 2022 in the first statewide strikes by teachers, nurses and other public sector workers in years. They were opposing a 2.5 percent pay cap, under conditions of the deepest cost-of-living crisis in decades, and the refusal of the Perrottet government to take a single measure aimed at alleviating the breakdown of the public healthcare and education systems.

There are undoubtedly workers, especially in the public sector, who have expectations of an improvement as a result of Labor's victory. In one of its few policies, Labor declared that it would end the public sector pay cap, and postured as a defender of nurses and teachers. This phony campaign, by a party that has slashed education and healthcare federally and at the state level for decades, was heavily promoted by the corporatised trade unions.

The expectations, however, will inevitably be dashed.

Minns has stated repeatedly that he opposes pay rises in line with inflation. And even nominal pay increases, which are really wage cuts, will need to be paid for by "productivity savings," i.e., budget cuts and worsening conditions.

Labor has refused to put a figure on any pay increases, instead directing the issue to one of a multitude of commissions it is establishing. Meanwhile, Minns has rejected calls for nurse-to-patient ratios in the hospitals, one of the central demands of health workers' strikes last year.

Already, sections of the corporate elite are warning of the prospect of an intensified wages push by NSW workers. To the extent that such warnings reference the mealy-mouthed statements of the trade union officials, they are another instance of misinformation. They serve, though in a backhanded fashion, to bolster the fraudulent claims of the unions to be defending workers, when the real record is one wage-cutting sellout after another.

But there is a note of truth to the warnings. Amid an upsurge of class conflict internationally, which has already begun to find expression in Australia, significant struggles by workers are inevitable.

Such struggles will develop in direct opposition to the Labor governments, at the state and federal level, which together with the union bureaucracy are tasked with enforcing the biggest cuts to living standards since the 1930s. That politically explosive situation fills the ruling elite with fear.

But to go forward, the movement that emerges will need new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions. And above all, it will require a socialist program, directed against the capitalist system that subordinates every aspect of life to the profit interests of the corporations and the ultra-wealthy. This underscores the importance of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign, which was alone in advancing this revolutionary perspective.



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