

Sudden departure of Western Australian premier points to political instability

Mike Head
30 May 2023

On Monday, in what was widely presented as a political shock, Western Australian (WA) Labor Party Premier and Treasurer Mark McGowan abruptly announced his resignation from office and state parliament, to take virtual immediate effect, that is, by this Friday.

McGowan quit despite being in a seemingly impregnable political position. He had won a landslide victory—the largest in Australian political history—at the 2021 state election, which reduced the opposition Liberal Party to a tiny rump of two members in the 59-seat state parliament.

However, his sudden departure cannot be explained, as he strenuously insisted at his media conference, on him being simply “exhausted.” Rather his resignation takes place as the state Labor government confronts mounting problems on multiple fronts.

McGowan’s decision to step down recalls the sudden decision of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to resign in January despite her media hyped popularity. Both appear to have seen the writing on the wall.

Firstly, like Ardern, McGowan had won his 2021 landslide victory on the basis of protecting the population from the COVID-19 pandemic. After the pandemic hit in 2020, his government shut the state’s borders and then implemented lockdowns and restrictions whenever COVID outbreaks appeared, effectively eliminating the virus inside the state several times.

Since then, however, the WA Labor government has joined every other capitalist government in letting the virus rip for the sake of corporate profit, with disastrous consequences. Since reopening and ending most safety measures in March 2022, the number of officially-recorded infections in WA has soared above 1.3 million, in a population of about 2.8 million, and confirmed deaths have risen above 1,000.

Like many other parts of the world, and Australia as a whole, WA is now experiencing the start of a new wave of infections, with 30 deaths and 4,481 reported cases last week. Moreover, surveys have indicated that about one quarter of the state’s COVID victims have suffered Long COVID symptoms. The mounting toll of victims will inevitably undermine the standing of the WA Labor government particularly as it postured previously as a defender of the population’s lives and health.

Secondly, McGowan has come under intensifying pressure from the political and media establishment on the question of China. He had just returned from a trip there last month, continuing his record of seeking to protect the interests of the WA-based mining giants that make billions of dollars a year by sending raw materials to China.

Reflecting those interests, which have also underpinned his government’s revenues to the tune of \$10 billion a year from iron ore alone, McGowan had been a critic of the escalating commitment by Australian governments, including the Albanese Labor government over the past year, to the US war preparations against China.

In recent weeks, after the release of the Albanese government’s Defence Strategic Review, which starkly shifted the country’s military doctrine to one based on planning for a war with China, McGowan spoke out several times against what he called “stupid” anti-China rhetoric that threatened the WA economy.

While not opposing the US alliance, on which the Australian ruling class has depended for its own imperialist activities throughout the Indo-Pacific since World War II, McGowan sought to straddle between Washington and Beijing. Earlier this month, after returning from China, he told the *Australian Financial Review* that Australia’s security would be improved by developing strong ties with China without damaging existing alliances with the United States and United Kingdom.

That view is totally unacceptable to the Biden administration and its close partners in the Albanese government, which are ever-more provocatively accusing Beijing of aggression. Yesterday, Geoff Chambers, chief political correspondent of the *Australian*, provided a glimpse into the charges being made against McGowan. Chambers wrote: “McGowan’s loyalties to Beijing undermined national efforts for unified resistance against Chinese coercion, foreign interference and cyber attacks.”

The *Australian* quoted Peter Dean, a senior advisor on the Defence Strategic Review (DSR). While McGowan was “entitled to his views,” Dean said the need for foreign and military policy cohesion across all federal, state and territory jurisdictions had never been so important. “[T]he DSR talks about the need for integrated statecraft, which is a whole of

government and whole of nation approach,” he said.

This “whole of nation approach,” reiterated repeatedly throughout the DSR, demands the development of a war economy integrated with the accelerating US-led war drive against China. The mounting confrontation and threats of open war with China can only lead to the unravelling of economic relations with Australia’s largest trading partner and have a particularly damaging impact on Western Australia.

Thirdly, and not least, McGowan faced rising working-class discontent. After first taking office in 2017, he led a frontal assault on workers’ wages and conditions, including by cutting public health, education and housing spending compared to population growth.

As a result, waiting times for ambulances to deliver patients into public hospital emergency departments doubled, and doctors and nurses denounced chronic understaffing. Similar conditions of staff shortages and intolerable workloads worsened in government schools and welfare services.

Labor imposed punitive pay freezes on more than 150,000 public sector workers, including health staff, carers, firefighters and teachers, followed by nominal wage “rise” offers last year of 3 percent—less than half the inflation rate.

Just before McGowan quit, his government, through the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), imposed, with the complicit agreement of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), a penalty of \$350,000 on the union, after earlier threatening a fine of nearly \$36 million, which could have hit nurses individually.

The unprecedented fine was over a one-day strike by 4,000 public sector health workers last November against the government’s 3 percent nominal wage rise offer—a stoppage that the ANF itself had tried to prevent.

Ahead of the strike, the Labor government took out full-page advertisements in the WA newspapers denouncing the striking health workers. The IRC, backed by the state government, not only declared the stoppage illegal, but sought to prevent workers from voting on the government’s pay offer and imposed a gag order to stop them speaking to the media—moves reminiscent of a police state.

For its assault on workers’ jobs, wages and social services, and its fierce protection of mining industry profits, McGowan’s government benefited from near-universal backing by the WA-based corporate establishment, particularly the mining, property and media magnates.

That included Kerry Stokes, the billionaire owner of the *West Australian* newspaper and the Seven TV network, and the country’s two richest people, iron ore magnates Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest. Rinehart led the corporate tributes to McGowan this week, saying the premier had “well understood that investment and development is the key to the success of WA.”

Labor has made retaining the support of the mining chiefs its top priority, including by granting gas project approvals,

neutering the Environmental Protection Agency and lifting a moratorium on fracking. Despite its initial “hard borders” stance on the pandemic, McGowan’s government kept the border open for fly-in, fly-out mining workers to ensure there was no disruption to production and profits.

These pro-corporate policies will continue under long-time party deputy leader Roger Cook, who will be installed as McGowan’s replacement after a series of backroom meetings yesterday involving rival union groupings in the party’s dominant supposed “left” faction. Cook was backed by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) bureaucracy.

The AMWU and other trade union apparatuses, including the ANF and all the public sector unions, have policed every one of McGowan’s anti-working-class measures and will now step up their efforts to suppress workers’ struggles under Cook.

However, McGowan’s hurried exit underscores the fragility of the entire political order, and not just in WA. The federal Albanese government took office last May with less than a third of the popular vote, demonstrating the further disintegration of the Labor Party’s previous working-class electoral base. It only obtained a slim parliamentary majority by winning four seats in WA off the back of the electoral collapse of the Liberals.

This instability is being intensified by mounting working-class discontent and struggles in Australia and worldwide under conditions of the pandemic catastrophe, the incendiary US war drive against Russia and China, the global economic and cost-of-living crisis, and deepening poverty and social inequality.

In WA, as across the country, workers are increasingly on a collision course with the union-backed Labor governments as these governments ramp up preparations for a catastrophic war against China and seek to impose the austerity measures demanded by a “whole of nation” war mobilisation.



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