

Australia: Union bosses force unpopular Queensland Labor premier to quit

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Senior bureaucrats from the Labor Party's affiliated trade unions forced Queensland state Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk to announce her resignation and swift exit from parliament yesterday. She will be gone as premier by Friday.

While the media presented Palaszczuk's tearful departure after almost nine years in office as a personal decision, it was obviously not her choice, at the age of just 54, to leave the official political scene so rapidly.

All the circumstances point to the union bosses desperately seeking to put a new face on the state government. Like the federal Albanese Labor government, it is increasingly reviled by workers and youth, particularly over the worsening cost-of-living, housing and health crisis. This has been compounded by Labor's blatant support for the Gaza genocide, on top of its massive AUKUS commitment to the US war plans against China.

A recent Resolve Strategic poll reported that Queensland Labor's primary vote had fallen to 33 percent, significantly below the 37 percent for the widely-hated Liberal National Party (LNP). Palaszczuk's approval rating was minus 17. With 30 percent of the vote going to the Greens and other parties, these results underline a developing crisis of the political establishment as a whole, not just the Labor Party.

Palaszczuk's exodus clearly has wider political implications. It follows the similarly sudden resignations this year of her Labor counterparts, Mark McGowan in Western Australia and Daniel Andrews in Victoria, as well as Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand. They all confronted collapsing public support.

Like Palaszczuk, they had won elections by claiming to shield people from the COVID-19 pandemic, only to join in dismantling all remaining protections. In Australia, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government completed that process, previously spearheaded by the Liberal-National federal government of Scott Morrison. Thousands of people have died as a result, including in Queensland.

None of the state premiers and territory leaders who presided over that criminal "let it rip" policy via the unelected "National Cabinet" now remain in office, except for the Australian Capital Territory's Andrew Barr.

Palaszczuk's axing underscores how much the Labor governments, currently in power federally and every mainland

state and territory, depend on the union apparatuses to contain and stifle the mounting disaffection throughout the working class as millions face financial stress due to soaring prices, rents and mortgage payments.

The key figure in Palaszczuk's removal is the United Workers Union (UWU) national political director, Gary Bullock, who sits on the Labor Party's national executive as a representative of Labor's "Left" faction.

Nationally, the UWU covers particularly poorly paid workers, including in factories and the child care industry. It is playing a central role in shutting down or suppressing strikes and the broader discontent over the deepening offensive by the Labor governments and the employers on the real wages, jobs and living conditions of workers.

The UWU's Bullock is said to command the allegiance of 34 of the 52 Labor MPs in Queensland's single-house state parliament. That includes the man whom Palaszczuk yesterday endorsed as her successor, Deputy Premier Steven Miles.

Miles may still be challenged by Health Minister Shannon Fentiman, who has the backing of another union "left" sub-faction, headed by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), and Treasurer Cameron Dick, who belongs to Labor's Right faction, which is beholden to the Australian Workers Union (AWU) bureaucracy.

If the factional powerbrokers are unable to agree on a new premier and deputy, that could force a mandatory ballot of Labor Party members and affiliated unions, which might take months.

Intensive efforts are being made by Labor and union apparatchiks behind closed doors to ensure there is no contest over Palaszczuk's replacement. They cannot afford any public discussion that could shed light on their fear of the social explosion building up in the working class.

Having barely scraped into office in the May 2022 national election, cynically promising "a better future," the Albanese Labor government's pledge has long worn thin. The overwhelming defeat in working-class areas of its October 14 referendum to entrench an indigenous Voice assembly in the country's colonial-era 1901 Constitution was a telling blow to its bid to put a false, progressive gloss on its program of war and austerity.

Knowing that Palaszczuk's fate could befall him, Albanese yesterday hailed her as a "Labor hero," "a three-time election winner," and "Australia's longest-serving female premier." He insisted that she had displayed "fierce pride in her state and a powerful determination to deliver for people."

In reality, Palaszczuk led a right-wing, anti-working-class government. That is why media polls indicated that it would lose the next state election, due in October 2024, opening the door to the return of another detested LNP government.

Initially, Palaszczuk benefited from leading Labor back into office in 2015, exploiting the widespread revulsion toward the 2012-15 LNP government of Premier Campbell Newman, which was ousted after sacking 14,000 public sector workers and selling off \$37 billion in public assets.

Newman's assault recalled the horrors of the repressive National Party government of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, which ran the state from 1968 to 1987, kept in office by gerrymandering electorates to disadvantage urban areas and by the opposition of the unions to any unified mobilisation against it.

In the 2015 election, Labor was silent on Palaszczuk's role as a minister in the previous Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh, which had suffered a landslide defeat after similarly privatising railways and other utilities and destroying thousands of workers' jobs. Bligh herself had been installed to replace the increasingly discredited Peter Beattie, who had spent nearly a decade in the premier's office.

Since 2015, the Palaszczuk government has had an appalling record on hospitals, housing and the jailing of working-class youth, especially indigenous youth. A 2022 study found that Queensland had the highest rates of ambulance "ramping" in Australia, with 46 percent on average waiting more than 30 minutes outside hospitals waiting for beds.

By 2022 also, a Queensland Council of Social Services Living Affordability Report found that typical working-class households were unable to afford a basic standard of living. Most were in housing stress, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

Queensland jails more children than any other Australian state or territory and has the highest recidivism rate. This year, responding to a fabricated witch hunt over "youth crime" amid the deepening social crisis, the Palaszczuk government twice rushed through parliament laws to lock up more children in adult cells, suspending the state's Human Rights Act to do so.

Queensland Family and Child Commission research "found that most children in detention have experienced violence within their homes, poverty, homelessness or the absence of a safe place to call home, and/or exposure to alcohol and other substance misuse."

In 2020, Labor responded to the dictates of big business by imposing a two-year public sector wage freeze, assisted by the trade unions. It ended a six-month moratorium on residential rental evictions and granted a \$270 million tax deferral to mining giant Adani for its Carmichael coal mine.

The Adani handout reflected the Labor government's dependence on coal royalties, which totalled more than \$15 billion in 2022-23—making Queensland a major contributor to global warming.

In this year's state budget, anticipating social unrest, Labor announced the biggest increase in police funding in 30 years—\$624 million over five years to hire another 2,025 officers. This is a warning of the police-state type conditions to which governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, will resort more broadly against the working class as the social and political crisis deepens.

Palaszczuk, the "hero," herself epitomises the life-long political hacks who constitute the Labor and union bureaucracy. She took the well-worn path from a Labor ministerial staffer to a seat in parliament. Her father, Henry, a cabinet minister under the Beattie Labor government of 1998-2007, virtually bequeathed his seat to her on his retirement in 2006. A state member of parliament for 22 years, he had occupied the seat covering Inala, one of Brisbane's poorest working-class areas, since the electorate's creation in 1992.

Political conclusions need to be drawn from these decades-long bitter experiences. Trade union-backed Labor governments have ruled Queensland for 29 of the 34 years since it won the 1989 state election, ending the Bjelke-Petersen era. Social conditions have only worsened.

Regardless of who takes the reins of the Queensland Labor government, it will intensify the offensive against the working class. Social inequality will keep soaring, aggravated by cuts to health, welfare and education, while billions of dollars are poured into preparing for a US-led war with China amid the US-backed barbarism in Gaza and the NATO-US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The only alternative lies in joining and building the Socialist Equality Party to develop the revolutionary socialist and internationalist leadership required to end the underlying capitalist profit system itself.



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