

Australian trade union powerbrokers instal new Labor state premier

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Political events of the past week in the Australian state of Queensland have provided a graphic picture of the extent to which the top trade union bureaucrats control the country's Labor governments. They also point to the developing crisis of these pro-business, right-wing governments.

Just days after union powerbrokers forced the immediate resignation of Queensland Labor Party Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk last Sunday, she was replaced by Steven Miles, the former deputy premier. He was formally sworn into office yesterday by the state's governor.

The same combination of so-called Left and Right union chiefs who unceremoniously dumped Palaszczuk, who had been in office for nearly nine years, installed Miles after sealing backroom deals.

Labor members of state parliament dutifully endorsed Miles' elevation shortly before he was sworn in. Miles got the post with the obvious backing of 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.

Bullock and his union apparatus are said to command the allegiance of 34 of the 52 Labor MPs in Queensland's single-house state parliament. That includes Miles, who conspicuously referred to Bullock as one of his "mentors" in his inaugural media conference as premier.

As part of a power-sharing deal with Labor's Right faction leaders, their representative, Treasurer Cameron Dick, was likewise installed as deputy premier. The Right faction secured one extra seat in the government's cabinet, which has been expanded from 18 to 19 members to accommodate that arrangement.

Dick, backed by the Right faction union chiefs like Australian Workers Union (AWU) boss Stacey Schinnerl, agreed to anoint Miles to kill off a brief challenge by Health Minister Shannon Fentiman. Reportedly, Fentiman had been endorsed by a Left sub-faction led by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) bureaucrats.

In return, Dick will also bolster the Right faction's position by becoming trade and investment minister, as well as treasurer and taking control of Miles' portfolios of State Development, Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning.

All this makes a mockery of the efforts being made by Miles and the corporate media to present his government as a "renewed and fresh face." Five new members will join the cabinet, all of whom were already assistant ministers under Palaszczuk. In turn, their assistant ministry posts will be filled by five others, each hand-picked by union-aligned factional powerbrokers.

Since taking office in 2015, the state Labor government has presided over worsening staff shortages and resources in the state's public hospitals and schools, and a growing social housing and homelessness crisis. During the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, it imposed a two-year wage freeze on public sector workers, enforced by the union leaders.

After winning re-election most recently in 2020 by claiming to protect people by shutting the state's borders in response to the pandemic, the Palaszczuk government joined all the country's other governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, in scrapping every health safety measure, letting COVID rip at the cost of an estimated 1,000 lives in Queensland.

In a transparent bid to adopt a new image, Miles and Dick have announced several token measures, including to set a higher target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent by 2035, and to freeze car registration fees and public transport fares, for one year, in 2024, before a state election due in October.

But in his inaugural speech, Miles made plain the intensified right-wing, pro-business and repressive character of the government's agenda, to be implemented in close partnership with the union bureaucrats. First, he announced a consultative body, the Queensland Leaders' Forum "to bring together business, industry, community and unions in the one room to work together."

Second, Miles declared the government would increase police resources because "youth crime in Queensland is unacceptably high." The Queensland government already jails more children, many of them indigenous, than any other Australian state or territory. This year, responding to a media 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.

Miles has personally associated himself with this “law and order” crusade. Last year, when a magistrate released children being held in the Townsville police watch house, Miles publicly attacked the courts, claiming the safety of people was being “held to ransom by rogue courts and rogue justices.”

Miles’ vow of an even greater crackdown on “youth crime” is another warning of the police-state type conditions to which governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, will resort against the working class as the social and political crisis deepens.

With Labor governments currently in office federally and in every mainland state and territory, the abrupt switch in Queensland has clear implications more broadly. Palaszczuk was the third Labor premier to suddenly quit this year, following the departures of Mark McGowan in Western Australia and Daniel Andrews in Victoria.

The ruling capitalist class is relying heavily on the union-backed Labor governments, particularly that of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, to impose its widely-opposed program of war and austerity on the working class. That includes assisting the US-supported Israeli genocide in Palestine, escalating preparations to join a potential US-led nuclear war against China and making workers and youth bear the burden of militarism and the cost-of-living crisis.

Like Palaszczuk’s government, however, media polls indicate disintegrating support for Albanese’s administration, which has fallen below the one-third of the primary vote that it obtained to scrape into office in May 2022. These polls are only a pale and distorted expression of the disaffection in the working class, particularly over the Gaza genocide and the sharp decline in real incomes and living conditions.

Most significantly of all, the events in Queensland highlight the extent to which the union chiefs control the Labor governments, which depend on them to police the program of Labor and the ruling class as a whole.

For four decades, the union machines have ruthlessly strangled and suppressed rank-and-file opposition to the measures through which successive governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have inflicted an ever-widening gulf between the wealthy corporate elite and the deteriorating working and living conditions of workers.

One of the chief mechanisms of this suppression has been the anti-strike enterprise bargaining laws that the union leaders helped draft for the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, and reinforce for the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments from 2007 to 2013. These laws made them the industrial police of the employers.

Every time that workers have sought to fight cuts to jobs and conditions, even during brief enterprise bargaining periods, union officials have shut down any stoppages as quickly as possible, and vehemently opposed any unified working-class strike action, declaring that such a struggle would be illegal and severely punished.

Working hand-in-glove with the current union chiefs, the Albanese government has introduced further workplace relations laws designed to try to strengthen the waning capacity of the union apparatuses to contain the working-class unrest that has been increasingly brewing up as a result.

Now the Queensland turmoil has laid bare the reality that the ruling class and its political servants in the Labor governments could not survive without the union bureaucrats who pull the strings behind the scenes, no less committed to the capitalist and militarist agenda.

Noticeably, in media interviews Miles defended the union bureaucracy’s grip over the Labor Party. “The trade union movement has a very strong role in the Labor Party,” he stated.

Miles himself typifies this relationship, having written a university PhD thesis on “trade union renewal.” Before securing a seat in the state parliament in 2015, he was a Labor staffer and union official, first as the industrial relations director for the Queensland branch of the public sector union and later as national campaign director for what would become the UWU.

Miles actually began his climb up the political ladder in Labor’s Right faction. He was an adviser to then Right faction Deputy Premier and Treasurer Andrew Fraser in the Bligh state Labor government, which was thrown out of office in an electoral landside defeat in 2012 after axing thousands of public sector jobs and privatising rail and other basic services.

After failing to gain parliamentary pre-selection from the Right faction, Miles switched to the Left faction, eventually winning a seat in 2015 on his third attempt. Now he has been put in charge, together with the union bureaucrats, of deepening the offensive in Queensland against the working class and enforcing the war program.



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