

Another Labor state or territory leader quits suddenly in Australia

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Northern Territory (NT) Chief Minister Natasha Fyles abruptly resigned this week, becoming the fourth Australian state or territory Labor Party leader to do so since June. Fyles gave only two days' notice of leaving the NT's top post, making hers the fastest departure yet.

Fyles quit after online news outlet *NT Independent* reported that she had failed to disclose a small shareholding in a mining company that she had defended against air pollution concerns. This provided a pretext for Labor's backroom powerbrokers to oust her amid collapsing support for the Labor Party in the NT and nationally.

Fyles easily beat the previous rapid departure record set by Anastacia Palaszczuk, who quit last week as Queensland premier with just five days' notice. Earlier, Western Australian Premier Mark McGowan resigned in June, followed by Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews in September.

Such a succession of quick-fire exits points to a developing political crisis of all the trade union-backed Labor governments across the country. They are becoming increasingly discredited among workers and youth because of the worsening cost-of-living, housing and social crisis. That has been compounded by Labor's support for the genocide in Gaza and its intensifying commitment to Washington's wider war moves against Russia and China.

A Redbridge Group poll in the NT last month gave Labor a primary vote of only 19.7 percent. With an NT election just eight months away, Labor's factional bosses reportedly seized on revelations about Fyles' shares to remove her. "We should have done this six months ago," an unnamed "senior Labor figure" told the *Australian*.

Fyles had been in office for just 19 months, since the

sudden departure of her predecessor Michael Gunner in May 2022. She became the first representative of Labor's so-called Left faction to take the post, only to intensify the anti-working-class policies of Gunner's administration, in which she had been a key cabinet minister since Labor took office in 2016.

In an emotional press conference on Tuesday, Fyles said her undisclosed shares in South32, the world's biggest manganese producer and majority owner of the open-cut mine on Groote Eylandt off the NT's northeast coast, had fallen short of her own standards.

Earlier this year, Fyles, who was also the NT health minister, rejected Aboriginal peoples' concerns about potential manganese dust from the mine, saying her government would not investigate air pollution levels on Groote Eylandt.

Fyles' shareholding in South32 was relatively trivial, worth less than \$2,500, but it was emblematic of Labor's commitment to backing lucrative gas and other mining projects. Labor has ridden roughshod over environmental and indigenous peoples' opposition to such projects, while implementing shockingly poor conditions in schools, public health and social housing.

Last month, Fyles was forced to divest her shares in Woodside Energy, a major gas miner. That shareholding had left her open to claims of a conflict of interest as her Labor government committed to a huge expansion of the NT's onshore gas industry.

In May, Fyles' government gave the go-ahead, after years of uncertainty, for gas fracking exploration in the Beetaloo Basin, a large area in the NT's interior, between Katherine and Tennant Creek. That decision overrode strenuous objections by scientists, indigenous leaders, environmental groups and cattle industry pastoralists.

Fyles also strongly pushed to secure—and vociferously

defended—\$3.5 billion in federal funding by the Albanese federal Labor government for a new hub on Darwin Harbour’s Middle Arm to export Beetaloo gas. Last week it emerged that her political adviser Gerard Richardson was a lobbyist for Beetaloo gas company Tamboran.

When Fyles first took office as chief minister in May 2022, she could still exploit her reputation, as health minister, for protecting the NT’s people, especially indigenous people, from COVID-19. When the pandemic first hit Australia in 2020, Fyles responded to indigenous concerns by closing borders and shutting access to remote communities, thus limiting illness and deaths.

However, the Fyles government, like all its federal and state counterparts, soon ended all safety restrictions to satisfy the demands of big business, opening the way for new waves of infection.

Under both Gunner and Fyles, the Labor government deepened the regressive record of previous Country Liberal Party (CLP) administrations. Public hospitals remained understaffed and underfunded, resulting in numerous failures.

In public schools, Labor maintained a punitive attendance-based funding model. As a consequence, some school buildings lack power and water, and 78 remote indigenous communities have no access to local secondary education, resulting in high dropout rates, social problems and substantial rates of criminal convictions.

Labor has also presided over an increase in Aboriginal incarceration. It has risen to 84 percent of adult prisoners and 96 percent of youth detention, far exceeding the 30 percent representation of indigenous people in the NT population. Most of supposed government “indigenous expenditure” in the NT goes to running prisons holding indigenous inmates.

In January, Fyles joined the Albanese government in responding to a media witch hunt about “youth crime” by reimposing alcohol and other restrictions on indigenous communities. In effect, Labor reinstated police-state measures that were imposed during the socially disastrous 2007 police-military intervention into the NT.

In November, there was more evidence of the underlying social crisis. A High Court case revealed that under the Labor government, like the CLP one

before it, the NT housing department had refused to rectify critical, even potentially life-threatening faults in indigenous social housing, such as the lack of a back door, no air-conditioning, water leaks, broken toilets and insect infestation. That case was brought to court by 70 tenants from Ltyentye Apurte/Santa Teresa, approximately 85 kilometres from Alice Springs in central Australia.

This record further exposes the claims of the Labor governments that this year’s failed October 14 referendum on inserting an indigenous Voice assembly into the Australian Constitution would have meant “better outcomes” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while “saving money.”

The defeat of the referendum, one of the Albanese government’s signature policies, was a telling blow to its efforts to put a progressive gloss on its program of war and austerity.

The political turmoil in the NT is another expression of a crisis for the ruling class across the continent. It depends heavily on Labor governments and their affiliated union apparatuses to suppress the growing disaffection among workers and youth, but that capacity is exhausting itself.

A Labor leadership switch in the NT is hardly likely to reverse the collapse in support. There was reportedly bitter backroom infighting yesterday to replace Fyles without a Labor membership ballot.

Labor members of parliament then voted “unanimously” to install Treasurer and Education Minister Eva Lawler after she struck a deal to make Attorney-General Chansey Paech her deputy chief minister. Lawler is not a new face. She has been a minister in different portfolios since Labor took office in the NT in 2016.



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