

Australian electoral authorities reject Socialist Equality Party's registration, despite it meeting membership requirements

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
19 February 2025

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), the body that oversees all matters related to federal elections, wrote to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on Monday, denying its application for official party registration.

Registration is required for parties to stand candidates in federal elections with their party name appearing on the ballot. Parties with parliamentary representation are automatically registered. In practice, this means that those with the greatest resources, such as Labor, the Liberal-Nationals and the Greens are exempt from the onerous registration process that must be completed by “third parties.”

Unregistered parties can field candidates but are denied the right to display their party name on voting papers, making their candidates virtually anonymous. Not only are the affected parties limited in their ability to advance a program and win electoral support. Voters are unable to identify candidates and their associated parties to cast an informed ballot.

The entire framework is deliberately anti-democratic and restrictive. That general point is even more glaring in this instance, given that the SEP fulfilled all of the arduous requirements, including by submitting a list of more than 1,500 electoral members.

The SEP and a number of other parties were deregistered after Labor and the Coalition passed laws in August 2021 that tripled the membership requirement to 1,500. Personal information of members, including their names, addresses and birthdates, must be provided to the AEC.

Monday's refusal followed an opaque process after the SEP list was submitted, which the AEC dragged out for more than four months. The Commission culled a number of members from the list for varying unsubstantiated reasons, after which it claimed that, of a very small sample of the SEP's membership, several told the AEC they were not, in fact, members. But under the guise of “privacy,” the AEC will not tell the SEP who those individuals are, so that it can verify the Commission's claim or amend the list.

The objective function of the AEC's refusal, and of the anti-democratic electoral laws that it is enforcing, is to disenfranchise the SEP's members and obstruct the fight for a

genuine socialist and revolutionary perspective, against war, genocide, authoritarianism and austerity.

The decision was made in the context of a massive crisis of the two-party system and the entire official political establishment. With a federal election due by May, both the incumbent Labor Party and the Liberal-National opposition are widely reviled.

All polling indicates that Labor's primary vote is far lower than the 32 percent it received in the 2022 election, when it was able to scrape into office because of an even greater plunge in support for the Liberals.

There is mass hostility to Labor, especially in working-class areas, over its imposition of the biggest reversal to living standards in decades, amid the global inflation and cost-of-living crisis. That has intersected with intense anger over Labor's support for the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, its witch-hunting of opponents of the mass slaughter and its vast increases to military spending, including to prepare for a US-led war against China.

Notwithstanding the opposition to Labor, the Coalition has not picked up substantial support. Its leader, Peter Dutton, a right-wing “law and order” figure, continues to be one of the most detested political figures in the country. Polling consistently places the “approval rating” of Labor's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and Dutton, in negative territory.

That polling also indicates that neither party will likely secure enough seats to form a majority government in their own right. Instead, the predictions are of a hung parliament and an unstable minority government dependent on crossbenchers to rule. That is discussed in ruling circles as a nightmare prospect, ushering in even deeper political instability than already exists, and cutting across the demands for a massive onslaught on social spending and a further militarisation in preparation for war.

This is only the immediate expression of a far deeper crisis of capitalist rule in Australia. As in countries around the world, the traditional mechanisms of official politics, through which big business has enforced its dictates and suppressed any challenge from the working class for decades, are breaking

down.

The Coalition, once a “broad church” conservative outfit, has increasingly fractured, as its most right-wing factions have gained dominance. Labor, which throughout the 20th century, served as the central mechanism for subordinating workers to the dictates of parliamentary rule, has lost its erstwhile mass base in the working class as it has dispensed with any pretense of social reform and transformed into an unalloyed instrument of the corporations and the banks.

There is a broad and growing desire for a political alternative. That also finds a limited expression in the polls, with the most recent and large-scale voter analysis, released by YouGov over the weekend, finding that one-third of eligible voters do not intend to cast a ballot for either major party.

Under those conditions, Labor and the Coalition have implemented and enforced increasingly draconian electoral registration requirements, transparently aimed at buttressing their crumbling two-party dominance. For many years, registration required the submission to the AEC of a list of 500 members. Under those already arbitrary and onerous requirements, the SEP was registered for more than a decade, from 2007 to January 2022.

The trebling of membership requirements prior to the 2022 election was a bipartisan attempt to muzzle any third-party candidates that threatened the dominance of Labor and the Coalition. The laws were enacted and enforced amid the acute phase of the COVID pandemic, as lockdown measures prevented political campaigning and the virus spread widely due to a profit-driven “reopening” drive.

In February, 2021, there were 49 registered parties, other than Labor, the Liberals, Nationals, Greens and their state-based affiliates. By February, 2025, that number has plummeted to 26, demonstrating the purpose and function of the anti-democratic electoral laws.

In March 2024, the SEP launched a campaign to regain its registration. In less than eight months, the SEP campaigned widely and won substantial support, exceeding the new membership requirement.

Workers and young people responded enthusiastically to the party’s opposition to the Gaza genocide and its explanation that these historic war crimes were part of a broader eruption of imperialist militarism that could only be fought based on a revolutionary and socialist perspective. They were attracted to the SEP’s insistence that what was required was building a political movement of the working class, independent of the capitalist parties.

On September 23, 2024, the SEP lodged an initial party registration application with the AEC, with a list of 1,545 members. With AEC membership checking not having yet commenced, the party submitted an amended list of 1,546 members on October 25. Some 147 days elapsed between the SEP’s initial application and the AEC’s rejection on Monday, and some 115 days between the amended list and its denial.

That period far exceeds the time required to process the SEP’s previous applications. In early 2021, the last time the SEP re-registered under the previous 500-member requirement, the AEC took just 27 days to approve it. This was despite the AEC checking the validity of membership for the same number of members in both applications.

One element in the delay this time was the role played by the Socialist Alliance organisation. A component of the 2021 electoral laws was to provide currently registered parties with effective veto powers over the use by other political parties of similar or identical words in their party names when applying for registration. This is extremely anti-democratic, and the suggestion that one organisation has proprietary rights over a word such as “socialist,” which has been in the political vocabulary for 200 years, is patently absurd. The SEP has for the past 52 years had the word “socialist” in its name but is now required to seek permission from Socialist Alliance to retain it.

Socialist Alliance took 21 days to provide the AEC with the appropriate form of authorisation. That is, the pseudo-left party, which promotes Labor, the Greens and the corporatised union bureaucracy, played a subsidiary role in delaying the SEP’s application.

The AEC accepted 1,541 SEP members as eligible to be tested. The random sample size is a minuscule 33, compared with 32 when the membership requirement was 500. Such a small sample size can hardly be used to extrapolate trends in a list of more than 1,500.

The AEC claims to have contacted 45 people, reaching 33. Of those who replied, it asserts that 29 confirmed their membership, and four denied it, exceeding the maximum of two possible denials. Because of the secrecy and privacy provisions, the SEP cannot verify that or amend its list to remove anybody who no longer wishes to be a member.

The vast delay in the AEC’s processing of the SEP application means it is a foregone conclusion that the party cannot achieve registration before the next federal election. But the SEP will do everything it can to pursue registration, including by examining possible avenues of challenge to the AEC ruling.

Regardless, the party will intervene aggressively in the upcoming federal election, to provide workers and young people with a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective, against the program of militarism, austerity and authoritarianism supported by every other party.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact