Defeating Australia's far-right requires a political fight against the Labor government

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Masses of people have responded with shock and horror to far-right rallies that were held across Australia on Sunday. Footage of participants chanting anti-immigrant and racist slogans, many of them draped in Australian flags, has been shared widely, as have videos of violent assaults perpetrated by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network, which effectively led the demonstrations.

In taking forward a fight against the far-right and its attacks on immigrants, crucial questions are posed. What political climate created the conditions for thousands to participate in such protests? What is their relationship to the policies of the government and the political establishment?

In the first instance, the protests are another exposure of fraudulent claims that Australia is exceptional or exempt from the political shocks and upheavals taking place globally. The mobilisation of politically backward layers of the population by right-wing groups, on the basis of anti-immigrant demagogy, parallels developments throughout Europe and in the United States.

As in those countries, extreme right-wing tendencies are actively cultivated by segments of the political establishment, have entrenched support in the police and military, and feed off the social discontent fuelled by the pro-business policies of governments.

The connection between the official parties and the far-right mobilisation has been clear in the days since. On Wednesday, several senior members of the Liberal-National Coalition, a staple of the two-party system, voted in favour of an "inquiry" into immigration proposed by far-right politician Pauline Hanson, who participated in Sunday's march.

For its part, the Labor government has immediately responded with overtures to the far-right rabble. While extolling "multiculturalism," Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared there were "good people" who had taken part in the anti-immigrant protests, "concerned about [social problems]." In a Cabinet meeting, he reportedly instructed Labor MPs not to be too strident in their condemnations of the demonstration.

Notwithstanding the handwringing, all of the key elements of Labor's program have contributed to a fertile environment for far-right agitation.

Most obviously, the vilification of immigrants and refugees is a staple of Labor and the entire Australian political establishment. From Federation, Labor governments were the authors and enforcers of the "White Australia Policy."

Economic imperatives, including the need to develop trade relations with Asian nations amid the greater internationalisation of the economy, eventually compelled Labor to dispense with the policy in the early 1970s. But notwithstanding the formal abandonment of open racism, anti-immigrant demagogy remains lodged in Labor's DNA and it has continued to spearhead an assault on refugees and migrants. As it has always been, the aim is to cultivate nationalism and to divide the working class.

It was a Labor government in the 1990s that introduced mandatory detention for refugees who arrive in the country by boat, a blatant attack on the right to asylum continued by all Australian governments since.

The current Labor administration has expended immense resources to overcome a High Court ruling against its indefinite detention of refugees. Just days before the far-right rallies, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke was in Nauru, signing a secret agreement with its government to banish refugees to the tiny and impoverished Pacific Island. The resumption of "offshore detention" of refugees was carried out behind the backs of the population. It was not announced during the election campaign, nor was it discussed in parliament or reported in the media before being imposed.

Far-right governments internationally have hailed Australia's record of persecution as a model to be emulated.

Labor has pledged to halve overseas migration to 235,000 annually for the next three years. It has implemented punitive caps on international student numbers in particular. The government has explicitly connected those policies to the housing and social crisis, seeking to scapegoat immigrants for deepening hardship. That was also the central line advanced at Sunday's rallies.

In reality, the vilification of immigrants is a cynical cover for the fact that it is the Labor government that has imposed the biggest social reversal on workers in decades. Amid the massive cost-of-living crisis, Labor rejected even paltry measures to alleviate its impact, instead inflicting the full burden on working people.

Labor is overseeing the destruction of public housing and the majority of its measures amount to handouts to the property developers to maintain an inflated bubble and ensure massive profits in the sector. The gutting of health, education and social welfare programs has hit large sections of the population with the biggest decline in living standards since the end of World War II.

The two-pronged program of increasing social misery for masses of people, and of blaming foreigners, is guaranteed to create an

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environment in which far-right tendencies can make an appeal.

In addition, Labor's tenure has been marked by full participation in an eruption of militarism by imperialist governments globally. In particular, Labor has completed Australia's transformation into a frontline state for a catastrophic war with China.

As part of that war-planning, Labor has expressed its complete commitment to the US alliance, with Albanese and other government leaders directing fawning comments to US President Donald Trump, even as he seeks to overturn American democracy and establish a fascistic dictatorship. Alongside that participation in the normalisation of fascism, domestically Labor has sought to cultivate a wartime atmosphere, including through calls for a "whole-of-nation" military effort and the demonisation of countries such as Iran, Russia and China.

The far-right protests occurred, moreover, as Labor is continuing to support the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, in crimes that can only be compared to those of the Nazis. Labor's intense hostility to mass pro-Palestinian sentiment, including its threats to ban protests, is widely shared within the far-right milieu.

The trade union bureaucracies function as Labor's accomplices on every front. For decades, they have joined in the promotion of anti-immigrant nationalism, demonising foreign workers and blaming them for the assault on wages and conditions. The union leadership is itself responsible for that onslaught. They have ensured that in the course of the two years of the Gaza genocide, not one shipment bound for Israel has been stopped.

The attitude of the political establishment, supported by the trade union leaderships, to the plight of the Palestinians is no different from their attitude to the conditions of the Australian working class. A corporatised police force of governments and big business, the union apparatus has imposed an unending race to the bottom, explicitly premised on the need for workers to "sacrifice" to ensure that Australian businesses remain globally competitive.

As part of that role, the unions have suppressed virtually all industrial action, including blocking any major and sustained strikes amid the cost-of-living crisis. That suppression serves to atomise workers. By preventing any class response to the social crisis, the union bureaucracies leave the field to the far-right to pitch to social discontent.

The fight against the far-right, then, means a political struggle by the working class against the Labor government. And such a fight, which must be based on the independent mobilisation of the working class, is only possible through a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves.

Amid the shock over the far-right mobilisation, various upper middle-class pseudo-left tendencies are seeking to obscure that basic reality.

Various self-styled anti-fascist activists are circulating a petition, calling on the Labor government to deport Nazi leader Thomas Sewell to New Zealand where he was born. The petition positively invokes draconian laws under which immigrants convicted of serious criminal offences can be deported.

Those promoting the petition have chosen the most reactionary grounds upon which to oppose a Nazi. In their purported campaign against Sewell, they are buttressing and reinforcing the entire anti-immigrant framework upon which his own politics are based.

The pseudo-left group Solidarity has responded to Sunday's protests by calling for "anti-racist unity." The greater part of its statement insists on the need for opponents of the fascists to cajole the union bureaucracy into opposing the far-right. Solidarity makes no attempt to explain why the unions have shown virtually no interest in opposing the fascists. It is calling for a de facto alliance with the anti-immigrant Labor government, via the Labor-aligned union bureaucrats, whose role is to prevent any movement of the working class.

For its part, Socialist Alternative has advocated street confrontations with the fascists. This has nothing in common with the traditions of the socialist movement, instead belonging to the bankrupt arsenal of anarchism. Such confrontations serve to cover over all of the political issues in the fight against the far-right, above all the role of Labor and the unions. They are a pantomime, aimed at covering over the suppression of any mass action by the union bureaucracy, and a recipe for police provocations.

Above all, these pseudo-left forces seek to prevent an understanding of the fundamental lesson. That is that the promotion of far-right tendencies is one expression of a breakdown of capitalism globally. As in the 1930s, the ruling elites are responding by hurtling to the right. The adoption of far-right and authoritarian methods of rule is the political reflection of their policy of war and massive austerity, which cannot be imposed democratically.

That underscores the urgent necessity to build a socialist movement of the working class, in Australia and internationally. A central plank of such a movement is the unconditional defence of all immigrants, including their right to live and work wherever they choose with immediate full citizenship rights, as part of the fight against the outmoded and reactionary capitalist nation-state system.

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