

50 Years since the Canberra Coup: A Marxist assessment

Mike Head

11 November 2025

Today marks the 50th anniversary of the November 11, 1975 dismissal of the Australian Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, carried out by Governor-General John Kerr, the official representative of the British monarchy.

Working in close collaboration with the UK and US political and intelligence establishments, Kerr utilised the “reserve powers” of the British royalty, deliberately preserved in the colonial-era 1901 Australian Constitution, to remove an elected government.

Under this constitution, the governor-general has the power to appoint and dismiss ministers at his or her “pleasure,” prerogative (suspend) or dissolve parliaments and is the “commander-in-chief” of the armed forces. Yet he or she supposedly acts, by unwritten convention, on the advice of the government of the day.

Exercising these powers on November 11, 1975, Kerr conducted two dismissals. The first, at 1 p.m., was to remove Whitlam as prime minister. The second, at 4:30 p.m., was to dissolve both houses of parliament just after the newly installed Liberal-Country Party government of Malcolm Fraser had lost a no-confidence vote in the House of Representatives by 64 votes to 54.

In Australia, a country with a purportedly stable capitalist parliamentary democracy, this entire facade was thrust aside in 1975 in response to what was—as this article reviews—a potentially revolutionary upsurge of working-class struggles amid a period of acute crisis of capitalism internationally.

Widespread strikes and protests erupted in the lead-up to the Canberra Coup and in subsequent days. Kerr could not have succeeded in ousting the government without the assistance of Whitlam himself, as well as Labor and trade union leaders, headed by then Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Labor Party president Bob Hawke. Aided and abetted by the Stalinist leaders of the major trade unions, they all accepted the dismissal and directed workers to go back to work and “maintain their rage” until a new election.

While troops were not mobilised against the mass opposition during the Canberra Coup, the armed forces were placed on alert, and would have been called out, if Whitlam, his ministers and the union bureaucrats had lost control of the strikes and demonstrations.

Far from being a peculiarly Australian affair, or a personal aberration of Kerr himself, as it is ludicrously depicted in the corporate media, the Canberra Coup can only be understood within the context of the intense class struggles taking place internationally.

Its political lessons are more critical than ever today as the ruling classes turn increasingly to authoritarian and fascist forms of rule, above all at the very centre of imperialism in the United States, as they confront a new period of revolutionary upheaval.

The global context

The Whitlam government’s removal took place amid immense worldwide political instability that triggered ruling class fears of social revolution, including in Australia.

The period from 1968 to 1975 was marked by the most convulsive uprisings of the international working class since the aftermath of World War II. Not only was US imperialism facing opposition at home and internationally to its barbaric neo-colonial war in Vietnam. Workers internationally were on the offensive, demanding higher wages and better conditions.

In May-June 1968, France was convulsed by an indefinite general strike that brought the government of President Charles De Gaulle’s regime to its knees and it only survived with the assistance of the Stalinist Communist Party. In Italy, a wave of strikes erupted in what became known as the “Hot Autumn” of 1969. In 1970, the social democratic-Stalinist “Popular Unity” coalition Allende government was elected in Chile on the basis of a raft of populist promises to ameliorate social conditions.

In 1974, workers’ struggles erupted in Britain, culminating in the bringing down of the Heath Conservative government. In the same year, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign in 1974 as US imperialism and its puppet government plunged toward final defeat in Vietnam in April 1975. In Europe, military and fascist dictatorships fell one after another in Portugal, Greece and Spain from 1974 to 1976, amid mass popular opposition.

These political upheavals were fuelled by a deep crisis of the profit system internationally, as the post-World War II boom was coming to an end. The ability of US imperialism to stabilise global capitalism based on its own overwhelming economic domination and the betrayals by Stalinism of the post-war, working-class upsurge was ending. International trade and financial arrangements had been underpinned by the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, which made the US dollar a world currency convertible to gold at the fixed rate of \$35 per ounce.

In August 1971, facing inflation at home and a looming international run on gold, Nixon ended the gold backing for the US dollar, destabilising the global monetary system. That gave rise to stagflation—soaring inflation and unemployment—intensified by the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973–74 and the worst worldwide recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Australia was no exception to the global economic and political reverberations. That was signalled by a near-general strike in May 1969 that forced the release of jailed trade union leader, Clarrie O’Shea, effectively shattering the decades-old anti-strike “penal powers” that had been invoked to imprison him for supporting stoppages by his tramway union’s members.

About 1 million workers, from a population of 12 million, stopped work over six days, despite the opposition of the official union apparatus, the ACTU. The strikes only ended when an anonymous donor paid O’Shea’s union’s fine, enabling union officials to claim a victory and prevent a full-

scale conflict with the Liberal-Country Party government that was widely hated in the working class.

Not only were the anti-strike laws essentially smashed. So was the capacity of the conservative government, in office since 1949, to suppress workers' struggles. In the wake of the 1969 upheaval, Hawke was installed as ACTU president, with the backing of the "left" and Stalinist union leaders, in a bid to contain the discontent with the discredited and fragile government and channel it behind the Labor Party.

By the end of the 1960s, there was fear in ruling circles about the growing militancy of workers, combined with the intensifying opposition of workers and young people to the Vietnam War and the conscription of 20-year-olds that the Liberal-Country Party government had imposed in 1965 as it sent troops to join the war.

Vietnam moratorium protests, the first of which took place in May 1970, were the largest public demonstrations in Australia's history at the time. More than a quarter of a million people joined the protests across the country, with some 100,000 in Melbourne alone for the first of three moratorium mobilisations. The huge protests in Australia followed US moratorium demonstrations in October 1969, in which more than 500,000 Americans protested in 1,200 cities and towns, and anti-war protests, and were part of widespread protests internationally.

The Whitlam government comes to office

Confronted by this political radicalisation, sections of the ruling class—notably including Rupert Murdoch's media outlets—strongly, although nervously, backed Whitlam's ascension in 1972 in the hope that a Labor government, supported by the ACTU, could contain the movement within safe parliamentary channels and stem the growing threat to bourgeois rule.

Whitlam was well aware of his political tasks. Since taking over as Labor leader in 1967, he had declared his life's political mission to be to head off the threat from below to the parliamentary order. All of his election promises and social and economic reforms had the single purpose of maintaining control of an incipient rebellion of workers and youth fed up with the Vietnam War and the constraints of 23 years of conservative rule.

Labor's election slogan "It's Time" resonated broadly. The party was swept into office, with the enthusiastic support of young people in particular, winning almost 50 percent of the primary vote. Labor lowered the voting age to 18, abolished conscription, released conscientious objectors from prison and withdrew Australian troops from Vietnam.

While its social reforms were limited in scope, they were progressive and today, in a period of social regression, would appear astonishing to many. The Whitlam government abolished university fees, making tertiary education free for the first time, and introduced a universal medical insurance scheme, offering free access to doctors and public hospitals, also for the first time. It is a telling indictment of subsequent Labor governments that they have systematically undermined or abolished these reforms.

The honeymoon period with Labor was short-lived, however. In just over a year, amid mounting inflation globally, workers went on the offensive to defend their wages and conditions. They confronted a Labor government, acting on the orders of the banks and big business and in cahoots with the union leaders, determined to bring wage rises under control.

One of the most explosive signals was a two-month strike by 3,000 workers in May-July 1973 at the Ford car assembly plant in Broadmeadows, Melbourne. This strike (see video) saw lowly-paid

workers defy return to work efforts by "left" union officials, including driving Communist Party union leaders off the stage.

In an effort to quash workers' pay demands, Whitlam called a December 1973 constitutional referendum to hand the federal government the power to control wages (under the guise of regulating "prices and incomes"), only to suffer a resounding defeat.

The following year, 1974, saw the greatest level of strikes in living memory, resulting in the largest wage rises in Australian history. In 1972, 2 million working days had been lost as a result of strikes. In 1973, that rose to 2.6 million and in 1974, almost 6.3 million—the highest number since 1919 and the post-World War I strike wave.

In 1974, wage claims leapfrogged as workers won rises of \$15 to \$40 per week (which would be nearly \$300 in purchasing power in today's dollars). In that year, adult male earnings increased by 28 percent, nearly double the official inflation rate of 16.3 percent.

The conspiracy begins

The ruling class in Australia was increasingly concerned that the Whitlam government was unable to carry out the task for which it had been installed—to contain this movement of the working class. These concerns were shared in Washington and London, which regarded Australia as vital to their economic and strategic interests in the region.

The Nixon administration feared that the mass opposition to the Vietnam War could threaten the ANZUS alliance with Australia, and in particular, the vital US satellite spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia. The concern was not so much with Whitlam, who was totally committed to the military alliance, but that the government might succumb to popular pressure and go further than he intended.

In 1971 and 1972, Whitlam had criticised the destructive US bombing of North Vietnam, in a bid to gain support among the mass movement against the war and conscription. Whitlam's policies were, in fact, in line with those of the Nixon administration, which sought unsuccessfully to hand the war over to its South Vietnamese puppet regime before the ultimate defeat in 1975.

Vietnam War-era records in the Nixon Library reveal that by the time Whitlam was granted an audience with Nixon in July 1973, the Australian prime minister had done everything he could to prove that he could be relied upon to back US imperialism. The tapes prove that Whitlam had assuaged American concerns that a Labor government would rescind the agreements over Pine Gap and other US installations in Australia.

Nevertheless, declassified US State Department cables show that Washington remained alarmed about the ability of the Labor government to control popular opposition. In June 1973, just a month before Whitlam visited Washington, the Nixon administration dispatched Marshall Green as the US ambassador to Australia. Green was notorious as a "coup master," including as US ambassador to Indonesia, where he presided over the CIA-backed military coup of 1965–66 that massacred up to 1 million workers and peasants and brought General Suharto to power.

Declassified US diplomatic cables later revealed that Green conspired with Hawke, constantly communicating with each other about how to contain and suppress the strikes of workers, including the 1973 Ford workers' strike. By 1974, Hawke was increasingly involved in confidential discussions with Green and US labour attachés, who are invariably CIA operatives, about possible plans to replace the Whitlam government.

The Labor government turns sharply to the right

Amid the failure of the Whitlam government's referendum to stem the wages offensive of the working class, the Liberal and Country parties used their numbers in the Senate, the parliamentary upper house, to block the government's budget in April 1974. Whitlam bowed to the demand to call an election, which was held the following month. While Labor won, Whitlam understood that he had been put on notice.

In July 1974, Whitlam appointed Kerr as governor-general despite being well aware of Kerr's long association with the intelligence community in Australia and the US. During World War II, Kerr became a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs, part of military intelligence. While in Washington, he was seconded to the Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA). He had also been the presiding judge on the Commonwealth Industrial Court that jailed O'Shea.

The Labor government moved sharply to the right to satisfy the demands of big business by slashing spending and seeking to rein in wages. In August 1974, the "left" Minister for Labour, Clyde Cameron, blamed the trade unions and their wage demands for the mounting economic crisis. In early 1975, Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns, from Labor's so-called socialist left faction, declared that it was necessary to "understand the system we live in" where "profits are essential."

With a political showdown clearly looming, the Liberal Party removed the ineffectual Billy Snedden as opposition leader in February 1975, installing the hardline Malcolm Fraser as his replacement. Fraser declared that no move would be made to remove the government. But he added the decisive caveat—unless "reprehensible circumstances" made it necessary.

In 1975, a sustained destabilisation operation began involving the Murdoch and other corporate media, the capitalist state and the opposition parties—with the involvement of both Britain and the United States. Businessmen with various intelligence connections embroiled the government in a scandal involving overseas loans. The scandal was exploited to remove Cairns as treasurer, then ultimately from the ministry. In July, when Cairns refused to step down, Whitlam asked Kerr to withdraw Cairns' ministerial commission—invoking the same powers that were used to oust Whitlam just four months later.

While the August budget met some of the demands of big business, the question remained in ruling circles as to whether the working class would accept it. The political crisis erupted into the open on October 15, when the opposition parties, instigated by Fraser, announced that they would block Supply, or the money bills associated with the budget, in the Senate unless an election was called. Without Supply, the government would run out of money.

On the brink of open civil conflict

For more than three weeks, the nation teetered on the brink of civil conflict. From the day the Liberals first blocked Supply, October 16, mass protests and strikes began across the country. Starting with thousands of public servants and other unionists gathering outside Parliament House in Canberra, the next day saw walk-offs from Brisbane construction sites and a 5,000-strong rally.

The following week, more demonstrations erupted; 15,000 in Melbourne on October 20, 10,000 in Sydney on October 24, and a 24-hour strike on the Fremantle docks. Within ten days, over 100,000 workers joined strike action.

Behind the scenes, Kerr was conniving with key figures in the state apparatus, including military chiefs and judges, as well as the British monarchy, to plot the removal of the Whitlam government. He had already exchanged hundreds of letters with Queen Elizabeth through her official private secretary Sir Martin Charteris, a former high-ranking military officer, throughout the political turmoil of 1974–75.

In September 1975, Kerr had discussed with Prince (now King) Charles, during ceremonies for Papua New Guinea's independence, the possibility that he might have to sack the Whitlam government. In his correspondence with Kerr, Charteris gave the green light for the dismissal, assuring Kerr of the Queen's support if Whitlam tried to dismiss him as governor-general.

In dismissing the government, Kerr did not act as an individual. He acted as the military commander-in-chief, as specified in the 1901 Constitution, in which capacity he placed the army on alert. Kerr is also known to have had secretive consultations with at least two High Court judges—Sir Garfield Barwick and Sir Anthony Mason—who encouraged his actions.

But it was Whitlam and the Labor Party, along with the trade unions and the Stalinist Communist Party, who played the critical role in facilitating the coup by blocking the popular opposition that erupted. Less than two weeks before his sacking, Whitlam delivered a speech that revealed his central preoccupation was to prevent the working class from entering into a political struggle that could threaten the capitalist order.

Delivering the John Curtin Memorial Lecture on October 29, he declared: "I would not wish on any future leader of the Australian Labor Party the task of having to harness radical forces to the restraints and constraints of the parliamentary system if I were now to succumb in the present crisis."

In other words, for Whitlam, the crucial task was to ensure that "radical forces"—the growing political movement of the working class—remained trapped within the framework of the parliamentary order, even as the ruling class was moving outside it. That was why, when his government was sacked on November 11, Whitlam accepted it.

The events of November 11

In fact, acutely conscious of the danger of a working-class revolt, Whitlam and the Labor leaders immediately did everything they could to assist the coup, as the timeline of the day demonstrates. In particular, Whitlam kept the news of his sacking from the Labor senators for a critical hour-and-a-half, during which they voted for the passage of Supply, thus providing funds to the "caretaker" Liberal-Country Party Coalition government that Kerr had installed.

The timeline shows that Kerr handed Whitlam his dismissal notice at around 1 p.m. on November 11. Whitlam left Government House at 1:05 p.m., but did not alert anyone. Instead of returning to Parliament House to oppose the coup, convene the cabinet or arrange a meeting of Labor MPs, Whitlam went straight to the Lodge, the prime minister's official residence, and asked the staff to fix him a steak.

Fraser, who had been surreptitiously waiting in an adjoining room in Government House when Kerr sacked Whitlam, had signed an agreement and been sworn in as prime minister, conditional on securing Supply.

At 1:40 p.m., Kerr's statement announcing he had terminated Whitlam's commission as prime minister was placed into the pigeon holes in the press gallery at Parliament House, but this was not immediately broadcast, ensuring that most of the population remained in the dark.

Whitlam's own silence was critical, because the blocked Budget was

again presented to the Senate at 2 p.m. and swiftly passed by 2:23 p.m., backed by Labor and Liberal-Country Party senators alike. The Labor members, still uninformed by Whitlam that he had been sacked, reportedly believed that the Coalition had capitulated and passed the Budget to end the constitutional and political crisis. One minute later, at 2:24 p.m., the Senate was suspended.

Ten minutes later, at 2:34 p.m., having secured Supply, Fraser announced to the House of Representatives that he had been commissioned as Prime Minister. At 3 p.m., Whitlam moved a no-confidence motion in Fraser's government, which was passed by 3:14 p.m., with the Speaker instructed to call the governor-general and advise that he invite Whitlam to form a government.

But this was too late. Kerr delayed an audience with the Speaker, Gordon Scholes, until after 4:30 p.m., which was when Kerr dissolved the parliament for a general election to be held on December 13. The proclamation was countersigned by Fraser.

One of the High Court justices, Mason, had advised Kerr to ignore the Speaker. Mason told Kerr that the no-confidence motion was "irrelevant" as he had commissioned Fraser to form a caretaker government.

When Scholes finally met with Kerr just before 4:45 p.m., Kerr told him: "The house is in the process of being dissolved. It cannot be undone."

At that very same time, the governor-general's official secretary David Smith stepped out on the parliament steps to read Kerr's proclamation dissolving parliament to a booing crowd.

Whitlam's response on the parliament steps—his much-quoted "maintain your rage" call—was directed to "the campaign for the election now to be held and until polling day." In other words, Whitlam insisted that his sacking had to be accepted, and the widespread popular outrage channelled back behind re-electing a Labor government in a month's time.

Fear of insurrection

Whitlam was acutely aware that the viability of the capitalist state and parliamentary rule was at stake. Had the Labor senators voted against the budget, thereby denying Fraser Supply, the governor-general, as Whitlam later stated, would have "called out the armed forces."

In 1978, at a Canberra dinner marking the third anniversary of his dismissal, Whitlam said: "A lot of people have said, 'Why didn't I defy him? Why didn't I tear up his [dismissal] letter?' The answer is that this man would have called out the armed forces. There would have been a divided loyalty in the armed forces. They would not all have obeyed him but there would have been chaos in the country."

Whitlam's fear was not the mobilisation of the troops but that the soldiers might not have obeyed their orders in the face of the mass opposition that such a deployment would have triggered. This would have threatened to get out of the control of the ruling elite, including its political servants.

Other politicians involved later made similar admissions. Speaking on his retirement from parliament in 1983, former Liberal Party leader Billy Snedden stated: "If they [the Senate and the House of Representatives] had been sitting when the governor-general tried to dissolve, we would have got the troops in to get them out of the house. ... We were lucky that day ... there was a real fear of insurrection that day."

In an article published in the *Adelaide Advertiser* of April 22, 1983, Clyde Cameron wrote: "But for the fact that Whitlam failed to tell his Senate colleagues of the government's dismissal, Fraser would not have been able to meet Kerr's Supply requirements that day. He may never

have got it. The upshot of that would have resulted in Australia being without a government and without Supply, or without a Governor-General, and the stage would have been set for a civil war.

"These possibilities were actually considered by Kerr at the time he was planning the coup, and it is for this reason the 'commander-in-chief of the Defence Force of Australia' [the governor-general] called in the defence chiefs, conferred with the American embassy, briefed intelligence agencies and arranged for the armed forces to be ready for a 'red alert'."

US intelligence whistle-blower Christopher Boyce, who revealed CIA involvement in the Canberra Coup, later stated that it was "the velvet glove version of the government overthrow in Chile" in 1973, which brought the Pinochet military dictatorship to power. Thousands of political opponents were killed or "disappeared" by the Pinochet regime, and around 30,000 tortured, according to official figures.

Nevertheless, behind the so-called velvet glove of the Canberra Coup stood a mailed fist of the military. And as Whitlam was to observe, the fear in the ruling class was that, amid the extreme social and political tensions of the time, not all the troops would necessarily have followed orders to violently suppress protests and strikes.

The suppression of the mass movement

Despite Whitlam's call for the "rage" to be devoted to a Labor election campaign, the coup sparked days of mass strikes and huge protests. Tens of thousands walked off the job and joined demonstrations in the major cities, with many demanding a general strike.

Thousands marched on the evening of November 11 and many more the next day in all the capital cities. By November 14, almost half a million workers went on strike and the numbers protesting had swelled to more than 50,000,

Hawke, who was both ACTU and Labor Party president, vehemently opposed calls for a general strike.

Speaking to the media just hours after the dismissal, Hawke declared that, while the sacking of an elected Labor government constituted the greatest provocation ever carried out against the labour movement "we have got to show we are not going to allow this situation to snowball and there is a real possibility it will snowball into violence. We must not substitute violence in the streets and anarchy for the processes of democracy.

"Of course I am upset, but it is not just a question of a Labor government appearing to fall. My concern is about the future of this country. What has happened today could unleash forces in this country the like of which we have never seen. We are on the edge of something quite terrible and therefore it is important that the Australian people respond to leadership."

In response, the "left" and Stalinist leaderships of the largest unions, such as the metal workers, maritime and construction unions, restricted strikes to one day or half-day stoppages and appealed to their members to instead donate to Labor's election campaign.

While the military was placed on alert to deal with workers violently if necessary, the coup's success relied above all on the collaboration of the Labor and union apparatus. As they had done before Whitlam's dismissal, the Labor and union leaders worked together to prevent a political general strike. They insisted that workers, while protesting angrily, should await the outcome of a new election.

The declassified US cables show how much Washington appreciated the role of Whitlam, Hawke and the unions, and how it worked intimately with Hawke and other Labor and union confidants. A report to Washington on November 11 welcomed the coup, saying: "The governor

general's decision brought to a head Australia's most difficult political crisis since Federation."

The cable lauded Hawke's intervention: "ACTU president Hawke made an impassioned radio plea asking trade union members to remain calm and indicated that he was not inclined to dispute the position taken by the governor general."

After days of upheaval, the mass movement remained at the level of protest. The "left" and Stalinist "Communist" union leaders eventually succeeded in diverting workers back behind the Labor Party.

They were assisted by middle-class radical tendencies that downplayed the significance of the political crisis, thereby providing crucial support for the Labor and union leadership. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), for example, opposed the call by the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, for a general strike on the grounds that it was "too advanced."

The SWP was affiliated to the opportunist United Secretariat that broke from the Trotskyist movement in the splits of 1953 and 1963, rejecting the necessity of the fight for the political independence of the working class from social democracy, Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism.

This demobilisation of the working class paved the way for the anti-democratically installed Liberal-Country Party government to win the December 1975 election. Once it became clear that deeper independent action by the working class was not going to take place and that the coup had succeeded, many middle-class voters swung behind the Liberals, handing them a substantial parliamentary majority.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) explained in its 1988 perspectives document, *The world capitalist crisis and the tasks of the Fourth International*:

Together with the bloody CIA-backed military coup in Chile in September 1973, the Labor government's dismissal was one of the first moves in what became an international counter-offensive against the working class, fronted by figures such as Reagan in the US and Thatcher in Britain. The role of Whitlam and the union leaders, like their counterparts internationally, in suppressing the opposition of workers and youth encouraged the capitalist class worldwide to go on the attack.

Today's deeper economic and political crisis

The working class internationally has paid a very heavy price for the defeats and betrayals inflicted by the social democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist governments, and their associated trade unions, during this last period of revolutionary upsurge from 1968 to 1975. The vicious pro-market agenda imposed by US President Reagan and British Prime Minister Thatcher through ruthless attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class has been replicated around the world.

Underlying this offensive has been a fundamental shift in the economic base of society—the globalisation of production—that has undermined all programs of national reform and the national economic regulation on which they rested. In Australia, the Fraser government proved to be incapable of carrying through what was required. Rather, it was the Labor Party under Hawke, disciplined by the Canberra Coup, that unleashed the never-ending onslaught on the basic rights of the working class, all in the name of making Australian capital "internationally competitive."

The Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996, through an Accord with the trade unions, tore up the eight-hour day, reestablished university fees and gutted public health and welfare. They began the

process of selling off state enterprises, including Qantas and the Commonwealth Bank, and laid the basis for the wholesale destruction of manufacturing, including the entire car industry. Central to the ramming through of this reactionary program by subsequent governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition, has been the straitjacketing of the working class in "enterprise bargaining" and the destruction of any semblance of democracy in the trade unions, which function today as nothing more than industrial police.

However, 50 years after the Canberra Coup, capitalism globally confronts an immense economic and political crisis on a scale that eclipses that of the 1960s and 1970s. The ruling classes are being driven to war against their rivals abroad and class war against working people at home, and are turning to authoritarian and fascist forms of rule to carry out their policies. Above all this is epitomised by the Trump administration in the United States.

At the same time, however, a resurgence of the class struggle is well underway. Millions have taken part around the world against the Israeli genocide in the Middle East, backed to the hilt by US imperialism and all its allies. In the United States, masses of working people have joined the "No Kings" protests against the Trump administration's attacks on basic democratic and constitutional rights and its moves toward a fascist dictatorship to rule on behalf of the obscenely wealthy billionaires and trillionaires while the vast majority of the population are struggling to make ends meet. Strike movements have already erupted in many countries.

Australia is no exception. Taking into account population size, some of the largest and most sustained protests against the Gaza genocide have taken place here. Moreover, the Canberra Coup itself is a decisive refutation of the oft-repeated claim that a socialist revolution could never take place in Australia, which is one reason why the corporate media is today engaged in efforts to whitewash and cover up what actually took place.

What political lessons should the working class draw from the Canberra Coup? Firstly, it demonstrated the utter ruthlessness of the ruling class, which will stop at nothing, including the use of the military, to prevent any challenge to its rule. The extensive "reserve powers" of the governor-general used by Kerr to sack Whitlam in 1975 remain in place.

Secondly, it showed the fighting capacity of the working class, which repeatedly came into struggle both before and after the coup to defend basic democratic and social rights. It never accepted the legitimacy of the detested Fraser government, largely stymying its ability to ram through the pro-market agenda.

Thirdly, workers were confronted with revolutionary tasks, not simply keeping a Labor government in power that was already attacking their conditions, but a political struggle against the profit system itself which was the source of the attacks. The coup demonstrated that, no matter how widespread and sustained the spontaneous movement of the working class, what is indispensable to abolishing decaying capitalism is the forging of a revolutionary socialist party based on the whole heritage of Marxism.

This final point is of fundamental importance today. The political landscape in Australia and internationally has undergone substantial changes over the past 50 years. The Stalinist regimes and parties that played such a prominent role then have either vanished or been reduced to insignificant rumps as globalisation undermined their reactionary nationalist program of "Socialism in One Country."

The Labor Party and trade unions have paid a price for their decades of treachery—the collapse of any widespread, active support in the working class. Labor's primary vote at the 2022 and 2025 elections slumped to near record lows of around one-third. Union membership has shrunk dramatically, from its peak of more than 50 percent of the workforce in 1975 to around 13 percent today.

Today, the ruling class is heavily dependent on the Labor government of Anthony Albanese to implement its agenda of austerity, anti-immigrant measures and preparations for a US-led war with China as efforts are made to cobble together a more Trump-like party to replace the disintegrating Liberal-National Coalition.

The various pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative, Solidarity and Socialist Alliance, which trace their origins to the middle-class radical tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s like the Socialist Workers Party, have all but jettisoned any claim to be revolutionary or socialist. They function unashamedly as the apologists for the Labor Party and trade unions, justifying their suppression of any struggle by the working class, and as promoters of the middle-class identity politics of race, gender and sexual preference that only divides workers.

The class struggle will inevitably erupt here and likely in most explosive forms, given its long suppression. However, what the Canberra Coup teaches, above all, is the necessity to build new forms of working-class organisation, that is rank-and-file committees, in every workplace and neighbourhood, and a revolutionary socialist leadership, in advance of those struggles, as the means for preventing the barbaric future of war, catastrophic climate change and social misery that capitalism holds in store for humanity. That means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world party of socialist revolution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)