

One Nation's rise: The fight against the Australian far right requires a political fight against Labor

Oscar Grenfell
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South Australia's state election was another marker of a breakdown of the two-party system, of a political vacuum amid widespread discontent and of the rise, within that context, of far-right forces.

While a majority Labor government was returned to office, the most distinctive feature of the election, and what was new in comparison to previous polls, was the substantial vote of the anti-immigrant One Nation party. It received some 22 percent of all primary ballots cast in the state, making it the second-highest vote-getter, well ahead of the Liberal Party which received only 16 percent.

That was one expression of a broader lurch to the right by the political establishment. Another was the complete silence of the parliamentary parties on the war that is raging in the Middle East. That is because all of them support the utterly criminal US-led war against Iran, which Australia is actively participating in under the federal Labor government.

The impact of the genocidal war has yet to be fully felt either in Australia or globally, but without doubt the full force of price rises will mean a wholesale attack on the conditions of the working class.

The election was not only the first since the war was launched, but also since One Nation began surging in national polls around September last year.

One Nation has only picked up one lower house seat in South Australia, with the possibility of one or two more as vote counting continues, due to unfavourable preference flows and the distribution of its vote. But the election has answered in the affirmative the question of whether One Nation's high polling would translate into substantial primary votes.

That has a broader significance. Any conception that Australia would be exempt from the rise of far-right forces, expressed in the attempts of US President Donald Trump to establish a dictatorship and in the growing prominence of fascist parties in Europe, has been blown asunder.

As with those developments internationally, the rise of One Nation has undoubtedly shocked and angered broad sections of working people. One Nation's founder Pauline Hanson has been notorious for her stoking of xenophobia for almost three decades. The party's central policy is the demonisation of immigrants for all social ills, alongside the promotion of a racist Australian nationalism.

One Nation's growing prominence is a warning to the working class, and there are many who want to fight it. But the basis of any fight against far-right and fascist forces is an understanding of how they are gaining strength and which political parties are responsible.

The answer to that question is that the official political establishment itself, and above all the Labor Party, is responsible, both for the social crisis that One Nation preys upon and for implementing an anti-immigrant, nationalist and right-wing program that puts wind in the sails of the far right.

The context of One Nation's emergence to prominence is strikingly

similar to developments in Europe, particularly the rise of the anti-immigrant Reform party in Britain. There, as in much of Europe, the Conservatives are breaking apart, Labour and the social democrats govern as the unalloyed representatives of the banks and big business, committed to war and austerity, and sections of the ruling classes promote far-right and fascist forces to fill the vacuum.

In Australia, the Liberal-National Coalition, the "broad church" conservative formation that has existed for the past 80 years, is in an existential crisis. In the May 2025 federal election, it was reduced to a rump, which is also what it will be in the incoming South Australian parliament.

After decades of social polarisation, the middle-class constituency for the Liberal Party no longer exists. The Coalition is fragmenting. Its "moderate" wing is increasingly outside the Coalition, in the form of "Teal" independents who pitch to a relatively narrow and affluent upper middle class. Other elements of the Coalition are shifting to the right, both fuelling and competing with One Nation, and in some cases joining it.

Virtually all of One Nation's central leadership is a product of right-wing splits from the Coalition.

Hanson began her political career as a Liberal candidate in the 1996 federal election. James Ashby, her chief of staff, often depicted as the party's main strategist, was a media advisor in the federal Liberal Party in the early 2010s. Hanson's deputy Barnaby Joyce, a former deputy prime minister in Coalition governments, defected from the Nationals last year. One Nation's South Australian leader Cory Bernardi was until recently a federal Liberal Party senator.

In other words, far from its "outsider" or "grassroots" pitch, One Nation is directly spawned by the two-party system in its disintegration and reflects its sharp shift to the right.

While the Liberals attempted to destroy One Nation in the early 2000s by the use of the reactionary electoral laws, the Coalition, in fact, took on many of the policies of One Nation.

An even greater role has been played by Labor.

Since the early 1980s, it has functioned as the primary instrument of an unending assault on the wages, conditions and jobs of the working class, in the interests of the banks and the corporations.

The federal Labor government has inflicted the full brunt of the unprecedented inflation and cost-of-living crisis on working people, while pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into war, deepening the assault on social services and ensuring the fortunes of the ultra-wealthy.

It has been joined by the state governments, the majority of them Labor. The South Australian Labor government's cost-of-living relief measures over the past four years have amounted to a pittance; its housing policies have been geared to the property developers, amid an unprecedented crisis of affordability; and its funding of the public healthcare system, already in

a breakdown, is below projected costs.

In this election, One Nation picked up votes based on the collapse of the Liberals. But its most significant results were in the working-class suburbs of northern Adelaide. In Elizabeth, it received over 30 percent of the primary vote and in nearby electorates, over 20 percent.

Elizabeth, the former hub of auto manufacturing, has been devastated by the complete shutdown of the car industry in Australia, presided over primarily by federal and state Labor governments. Real unemployment stands at close to 20 percent, poverty rates are far higher than state and national averages, and entire generations have been consigned to an uncertain and precarious future.

The shutdown of the car industry was not only the work of governments collaborating with the corporations. It was enforced by the trade union bureaucracy, which has become an utterly corporatised instrument of big business and the state, hostile to the interests of the working class.

In that context, and under conditions where Labor was campaigning as a “responsible” and pro-business party of government, One Nation’s denunciations of the “uniparty” and its forthright references to the cost-of-living crisis and social crisis, downplayed by the government and the media, clearly resonated.

One Nation’s own promotion of nationalism and anti-immigrant scapegoating dovetails with that of Labor and the unions. It was Labor that in the 1990s introduced the mandatory incarceration of refugees, effectively annulling the right to asylum, a program that has been continued by every subsequent government. The current federal Labor government has openly scapegoated immigrants, and particularly international students, for the cost-of-living and housing crisis. For their part, the unions have for decades blamed “foreign workers” for the hardships afflicting “Australian” workers, in a policy of divide and conquer.

That is part of Labor’s DNA. From the early 1900s, it spearheaded the “White Australia” policy, which prevented workers from Asia and the Pacific Islands from entering Australia on the basis that they would lower wages of the existing working class.

The more recent attacks on immigrants have been one component of an endless barrage of xenophobia. For more than 20 years, the bogus “war on terror” has been used to eviscerate civil liberties and particularly to demonise Muslims, one of Hanson’s main hobbyhorses. Australia’s integration into the US-led plans for war against China have been accompanied by a McCarthyite campaign against purported “Chinese influence,” in a direct echo of Hanson’s agitation against an “Asian invasion” in the 1990s.

It is no accident that One Nation’s surge has partly coincided with the period since the December 14 antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi Beach. The political establishment, led by Labor, has gone on the offensive against democratic rights, relentlessly attacking opponents of the genocide in Gaza, passing laws to outlaw protests and even to criminalise oppositional groups and political parties, on the vague grounds that they promote “hate speech.”

On all of these issues, Labor and One Nation effectively agree. One Nation has backed the war on Iran that Labor is participating in, as well as the genocide that it has aided, and it has demanded an ever greater crackdown on democratic rights, including popular anti-war sentiment. In other words, there is a clear confluence between what One Nation promotes in particularly crude and virulent terms and what Labor represents.

One Nation’s ability to tap into the social discontent that exists is inextricably connected to the bankruptcy of what passes for the official “left.” The Greens are a party of the upper middle class, organically incapable of making any social appeal to the working class. Whatever their “progressive” posturing, they are a party of the political establishment, whose overriding ambition is to join coalition governments

with Labor.

The pseudo-left groups, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, also bear responsibility. Despite their names, they have nothing to do with the working class or the fight for socialism, instead advancing the interests of a grasping layer of the middle class. These organisations function as adjuncts of the political establishment, endlessly promoting the union bureaucracy and insisting that Labor can be pressured to “the left.”

When they raise the issue of the far right and One Nation, they consciously cover up the responsibility of Labor and the unions. Instead, they promote noisy protests that clarify nothing politically, oriented to the union bureaucracy, the Greens and sometimes Labor itself.

Their political function is directed at blocking the only viable perspective for combating the far right: building an independent political movement of the working class, opposed to the entire political establishment, above all Labor. Only such a movement, advancing the social rights of the working class, against the incessant assault on jobs, wages, conditions and services, can fill the political vacuum with a progressive content and combat the efforts to divide workers.

The overwhelming majority of those who voted for One Nation are not racists, with national polling before the election showing that most of the party’s support is based on the cost-of-living crisis and hostility to Labor and the Coalition. But to the extent that workers view One Nation as an alternative and are being taken in by it, they should be told bluntly that they are being conned.

One Nation’s anti-immigrant scapegoating, like that of Labor and the union bureaucracy, serves to divide the working class and to deflect opposition from the source of the social crisis: the dominance of the billionaires and the capitalist system itself. The division of workers along racial and national lines weakens the entire working class, “foreign” and “domestic” born, blocking any independent struggle for its interests.

One Nation’s attacks on immigrants and opponents of war are one component of a turn to authoritarianism by the entire political establishment, already being enacted in Labor’s anti-democratic laws directed against opposition to the Gaza genocide. They are two sides of a preemptive strike by the ruling class against mass social anger, which will take the form of an upsurge of working-class struggles. That is why powerful ruling-class figures, such as Australia’s wealthiest individual Gina Rinehart, are supporting One Nation.

The rise of far-right and fascist forces globally, together with the descent into dictatorship and war, are expressions of the breakdown of a rotting capitalist system. The alternative is the fight for a socialist program aimed at placing society’s resources under the democratic control of the working class, guaranteeing genuine democracy, peace and decent conditions of work and life for all.



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