The fight against the far right in Australia: Lessons from One Nation's history

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The far-right, anti-immigrant One Nation party is coming to ever greater prominence in Australian politics.

This is a rapid shift in the situation. In the May, 2025 federal election, One Nation received just 5.7 percent of the Senate primary vote, and did not pick up a single seat in the House of Representatives. Now there are discussions that it could be in a position to form some sort of coalition government in upcoming state elections and the next federal election.

One Nation's surge in the polls, beginning late last year, was confirmed in the South Australian election in April, where it received over 20 percent of the primary vote, substantially eclipsing the Liberal Party. The next month, One Nation won a by-election for the federal seat of Farrer in regional New South Wales, an electorate that for the entire 77 years of its existence had been held by the Coalition. In June, several polls placed One Nation above the Labor government. Polls have inherent limitations, but never before has a third party outpolled both the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor.

That points to a historic crisis of the two-party system. The Coalition is in an existential meltdown, caused fundamentally by the collapse of the relatively large middle-class constituency of the post-World War II period, which formed its base. For its part, Labor's vote is at historically low levels, and more significantly, it has lost any active, positive support in the working class, after decades of enforcing the dictates of the corporations and big business.

One Nation has been able to exploit popular discontent over the social and cost-of-living crisis, imposed above all by Labor, and mass hostility to the established parties.

At the same time, sections of the ruling elite have boosted One Nation, viewing it as a means of diverting opposition into a reactionary direction and of shifting official politics even further to the right. The prospect that One Nation could join or form government at the state or federal level, which would have been derided not so long ago, is now a subject of continuous discussion and debate within the ruling class, as they cast around for a political mechanism to impose their program of war and austerity.

This is part of an international process. Amid a breakdown of global capitalism, the ruling elites and their political representatives are hurtling to the right. That has been expressed in an eruption of imperialist militarism, epitomised by the utterly criminal assault on Iran by the US, which has been accompanied by openly genocidal threats from US President Donald Trump to "annihilate" an entire civilisation. That offensive is part of a developing global war, centred on the aggressive US-led confrontations with Russia and China.

Domestically, governments are enforcing a sweeping austerity agenda, to make workers pay for the vast outlays on militarism and the underlying capitalist crisis. This agenda cannot be imposed democratically and so they are turning to authoritarian and even fascistic forms of rule.

One Nation's rise represents a danger to the working class. But combatting it requires an understanding of the source of its growing prominence and those forces that are politically responsible.

What emerges, not only from One Nation's current rise, but from its history, is that the organisation has always fed off shifts to the right by the official political establishment itself. Above all, responsibility lies with Labor and the corporatised trade union bureaucracy, which have created the social crisis that One Nation exploits, legitimised anti-immigrant demagogy and done everything they can to suppress the class struggle, preventing mass anger from finding a progressive outlet.

The fight against the threat posed by One Nation, is therefore a fight against the entire political establishment, the cutting edge of which is the struggle to mobilise the working class independently, against Labor and the bureaucracy.

The rise of One Nation in the 1990s

There are definite parallels between One Nation's rise today and its emergence in the latter decade of the 1990s. The difference is that the tendencies that were expressed then, including a developing breakdown of the two-party system and a social crisis, are far more advanced today.

Contrary to her claims to being a political outsider, Hanson's career began as a Liberal Party candidate in the 1996 federal election. Hanson won internal Liberal Party preselection for the seat of Oxley in Queensland.

During the course of the campaign, Hanson was disendorsed by the federal Liberal leadership, over repeated statements she had made against Indigenous people. This was not a principled repudiation of anti-Aboriginal racism from a Liberal Party that trades in dogwhistling against Indigenous people, but reflected fear that the crudity of Hanson's statements would impact the party's electoral efforts nationally.

Hanson stood despite the disendorsement. Her campaign included populist overtures to the hardships of ordinary people, which she sought to divert into hostility to Indigenous people, welfare recipients and Asian immigrants. The fact that Hanson had been disendorsed not only resulted in outsized media coverage for her campaign, it enabled her to falsely posture as an opponent of the major parties and as someone who had been victimised for standing up for the underdog.

Hanson secured the seat, with a swing of 19 percent in her favour. That was a shock result, in an electorate that had been considered the safest Labor seat in Queensland. The upset reflected fundamental changes over the preceding years that had found expression in Oxley, a working-class seat encompassing the south-western suburbs of Brisbane. During her campaign, Hanson repeatedly referenced the surge in unemployment, including 25 percent youth joblessness in Oxley, which she falsely attributed to immigrants.

In reality, that social crisis was inflicted by the federal Labor

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governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, in office from 1983 to 1996. They implemented the ruling-class counteroffensive that was associated in the US and the UK with the openly right-wing governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

In a partnership with the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Hawke and Keating deregulated the economy and smashed up whole sections of industry, destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs. The offensive included the dismantling of workplace organisations, such as shop floor committees, through which the workers had previously advanced their interests and the establishment of a draconian industrial relations regime, prohibiting virtually all industrial action and creating the framework for decades of sellout agreements between the unions and the employers.

Under conditions of the globalisation of production, Labor and the unions dispensed with their earlier program of highly-limited reforms within the framework of capitalism, and became the most vicious enforcers of the dictates of finance capital. That created both the social hardship that Hanson preyed upon, and political disorientation that rendered sections of the population vulnerable to her right-wing demagogy.

In her maiden speech to parliament, Hanson continued her demonisation of Asian immigrants, Indigenous people and welfare recipients, while peddling the reactionary utopia of a return to a nationally-regulated economy, which she claimed would boost employment and alleviate social hardship.

Significantly, Hanson claimed to be taking up the anti-immigrant mantle of a political establishment that had founded Australia on the basis of a racist "White Australia" policy. She favourably quoted racist statements by Arthur Calwell, Labor leader from 1960 to 1967, who had declared that Asian and African people were "fiercely anti-white and anti one another. Do we want or need any of these people here?"

Hanson's speech was given vast media coverage, despite the fact that she was a lone independent in parliament. She was effectively picked up, as a vehicle for legitimising and accelerating a shift to the right by the entire political establishment.

Over the following years, Hanson's program would largely be implemented by the Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard, including an escalating assault on refugees and immigrants that had been carried out by Hawke and Keating and a demonisation of welfare recipients and Indigenous people as the spearhead of a broader attack on the entire working class. This was not only a question of the Coalition, but of Labor, which backed Australia's participation in the illegal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and positioned itself as the party better able to enforce the demands of big business than Howard's government.

One Nation was established in 1997, by Hanson, together with David Oldfield, a senior staffer in the office of prominent Liberal MP Tony Abbott and David Ettridge, a businessman and Liberal donor. The central involvement of Oldfield and Ettridge pointed to a fracturing of the Liberal Party, with hard-right elements moving in the direction of a far-right, even fascistic pitch.

The 1998 Queensland election and the ruling elite's turn against One Nation

In the 1998 Queensland state election, the tendencies that had been revealed in Hanson's Oxley victory, found far broader expression. One Nation received 23 percent of the primary vote, an unprecedented result for a "third party."

That triggered fears within the political and media establishment that a similar result could occur on a national scale, profoundly destabilising the two-party system and even threatening its very existence. Hanson had already played her role in shifting official politics to the right.

The response was a sharp turn against One Nation by the dominant sections of the establishment. Abbott played a central role, in a campaign that involved mobilising disgruntled One Nation members, a series of lawsuits and an intensive police operation.

In August 2003, Hanson and Ettridge were convicted of electoral fraud, with both sent to prison. That was a frameup, based on the invocation of anti-democratic electoral laws. Its threadbare character was underscored by Hanson's rapid exoneration.

Pseudo-left organisations, such as the now defunct International Socialist Organisation, hailed the prosecution and jailing of Hanson, presenting it as comeuppance for her attacks on immigrants.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party took a diametrically opposed position. Without minimising in the slightest our hostility to One Nation, as a reactionary and xenophobic capitalist party, we warned that the prosecution established an extremely dangerous precedent. It strengthened the control of the state apparatus over political life, creating the conditions where any political outfit viewed as a threat by the powers-that-be could be framed up on the basis of onerous and anti-democratic electoral laws.

The pseudo-left's support for this reactionary precedent was of a piece with its overall response to the emergence of One Nation. It directed widespread hostility to Hanson's anti-immigrant rhetoric behind noisy protest stunts. These were all based on presenting the pro-business and anti-immigrant Labor Party as a lesser evil and the unions as a counterweight to the far-right, in opposition to the fight to mobilise the working class.

The reemergence of One Nation and the growth of the far-right internationally

Having effectively been drummed out of politics, Hanson would return with an unsuccessful 2013 Senate campaign. In 2015, Hanson launched a "fed up" tour that would culminate in her election to the Senate in 2016.

Hanson's demagogy particularly focussed on anti-Muslim racism. As before, she sought to exploit widespread hostility to the major parties. In her incessant Islamaphobia, however, Hanson was attempting to capitalise on the political atmosphere created by Labor and the Coalition themselves over the course of the bogus "war on terror."

Hanson's reemergence also coincided with a stepped-up promotion of militarism by the major parties, following the decision by the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government to align Australia with a vast US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific, aimed at preparing for war against China. That included a major "celebration" of the centenary of World War I, prepared by Gillard and overseen by Abbott's Coalition government.

The two tendencies, of official anti-immigrant xenophobia focussed on Muslims and nationalist militarism, congealed in Reclaim Australia, a small far-right movement that was given substantial coverage. Hanson would speak at its rallies alongside fascistic figures, including those who would go on to establish the explicitly neo-Nazi National Socialist Network.

The official promotion of Reclaim Australia was an expression of a broader normalisation of far-right forces by the ruling elites internationally. That found its sharpest expression in the coming to power of Donald Trump in 2016 and his ongoing attempts to establish a fascistic dictatorship in the US, but has also been seen in the emergence of the

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Alternative for Germany, the Reform party in the UK and others. Hanson has positioned One Nation as part of this global far-right, including by fawning over Trump.

The COVID-19 pandemic, a massive global upheaval, was a turning point. In Australia, state and federal governments were initially compelled by demands from the working class and the parlous state of the healthcare system to adopt limited safety measures. One Nation railed against the safety measures and was prominent in an anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movement involving other far-right tendencies.

That movement was given vast prominence, far beyond its small numbers, and was invoked to legitimise the junking of any measures to stop the spread of the virus. Labor, working with the then Coalition government, played a central role in the profit-driven "reopening" of the economy in December 2021. Labor has since presided over the overwhelming majority of COVID deaths, more than 20,000. Once again, One Nation's program was implemented by the political establishment.

One Nation's current surge and the fight against the far-right

The current surge of One Nation, however, followed the May, 2025 election. It was dominated by a mass repudiation of the Coalition, which was correctly identified in popular consciousness with Trump and his fascistic program. Labor was reelected, but its vote, especially in working class electorates, remained at record lows.

Since then, the Coalition has been in a spiralling crisis, with open factional divisions, incipient splits and leadership changes. Claims that Labor's reelection expressed widespread support for it have been refuted. Labor, tasked with implementing a program of war, austerity and deepening attacks on democratic rights, is widely despised. This is a crisis of bourgeois rule that is deep and intractable.

One Nation's polling has particularly surged in the wake of the December 14 terrorist attack at Bondi Beach. That atrocity was seized upon by the ruling elite, led by Labor, to step up authoritarian measures directed in the first instance against opposition to the Gaza genocide, but more broadly against social and political opposition. That included Labor's passage of hate speech laws that can criminalise condemnations of Zionism and imperialism, and a twin measure that can outlaw political parties on the same grounds. One Nation has positioned itself as the most aggressive wing of this ruling-class campaign.

At the same time, it has made a phony pitch to social discontent, even though One Nation has not outlined a single policy that would alleviate the hardship, and its pro-business program would in fact intensify it. A years-long cost-of-living crisis, during which Labor has overseen the biggest reversal to working class living standards, has been dramatically exacerbated by the illegal US war against Iran. Labor has been among the most enthusiastic supporters of the war, and has imposed its social costs on workers, as well as implementing far-reaching austerity measures in the May budget, particularly targeting the disabled.

While picking up on social discontent from below, One Nation is being promoted by elements of the corporate elite, who are casting around for a political vehicle to accelerate the agenda of war and austerity, amid the crisis of the old parties. One Nation's most prominent supporter is mining magnate Gina Rinehart, the country's wealthiest individual, and elements of the Coalition itself are turning to One Nation, expressed most sharply in the defection last year of former Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce.

Notwithstanding its phony populism, One Nation's program is for a stepped-up assault on the working class, with Hanson branding workers as "lazy," denouncing even sub-inflationary pay increases and complaining that it is too difficult for employers to sack people. One Nation, like Labor and the Coalition, backs US-led wars. It has called for an even greater attack on democratic rights, from a massive reduction in immigration, to the restriction of abortion.

There is widespread hostility to One Nation, which the pseudo-left, as it did in the late 90s, is seeking to divert behind Labor and the union bureaucracy.

The pseudo-left's assessment of One Nation's rise was summed up by Socialist Alternative leader Mick Armstrong at that organisation's May conference. In a report that was ostensibly an analysis of One Nation's vote in the previous month's South Australian election, Armstrong essentially blamed the working class and promoted Labor and the unions.

Armstrong referenced the fact that One Nation had received more than 20 percent of the vote in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, including Elizabeth. He denounced those voters as "tradies," declaring that tradesmen were not part of the working class. Armstrong went on to claim that "tradies," together with students and pensioners were "lumpen," i.e., declassed and semi-criminal elements. That was a declaration of the pseudo-left's intense hostility to the working class.

In reality, the vote in Elizabeth pointed to the danger of One Nation exploiting discontent in the working class. Elizabeth was once the epicentre of car production in South Australia. Over decades, the industry was dismantled, with Labor governments and the trade union bureaucracy enforcing the eventual shutdown, leading to a major growth of unemployment and poverty.

Armstrong did not so much as mention this record, as he falsely claimed that Labor retained high levels of support in the working class and promoted the unions as a potential bulwark against One Nation. His political cover-up expressed the role of the pseudo-left, as a movement of privileged sections of the upper middle-class, tied by a thousand strings to Labor, the unions and the existing political set-up.

In opposition to the pseudo-left, the Socialist Equality Party insists that the fight against One Nation requires above all else the political independence of the working class and a genuine alternative, a conscious socialist program.

Amid mounting hostility to the offensive against wages, conditions and social spending, the SEP is fighting for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of and opposed to the union bureaucracy. Such committees are the only basis for unleashing the industrial strength of the working class, uniting its struggles and defeating the suppression and sellout operations of the bureaucracy.

Above all, a new, mass socialist movement must be built in direct opposition to Labor, the Greens and a political establishment that is hurtling towards barbarism. Such a movement, positively articulating the social needs and aspirations of the working people, would cut the feed from under the right-wing populists, exposing their phony demagogy and channelling social anger in a progressive direction, aimed at the socialist reorganisation of society, to meet human need, not private profit.

This is part of an international struggle that must be based on the global unity of the working class, including implacable opposition to the demonisation of immigrant workers, and an insistence that workers be permitted to live and work wherever they choose with full citizenship rights.

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