Victorian election launches: Labor, Liberals and One Nation committed to brutal austerity

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Competing campaign launches by Labor Premier Ben Carroll and Liberal leader Jess Wilson on Sunday underscore the reality that whichever party forms government after the November 28 Victorian election, their top priority will be to impose massive austerity against working people.

Such launches are always choreographed affairs. All the more so in this election, which is characterised by a major crisis of the two-party system.

Labor is polling at around 20 percent and facing the prospect of a massive defeat. The undeniable crisis of the Victorian Labor government is not just a state issue but reflects growing opposition to the program of the federal Labor government. The stench of defeat hanging over the campaign has been evident in an effective boycott of it by federal Labor leaders. Aside from Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, no others were present at the launch.

For their part, the Liberals may depend on the far-right One Nation to form government under conditions where they are competing with it for support.

Given that context, and the inevitable bluster, the most striking aspect of the launches was the pitch by Carroll and Wilson to the corporate elite, that they could carry out major cuts to social spending to pay for the deficit.

Carroll declared that he was committed to "hard decisions and careful management of the budget," thinly veiled code for such cuts. Wilson declared: "I can't remember an election where there's been such an intense focus on the need to pay down debt," before promising, "Victoria cannot keep borrowing more and expecting families to pay the price."

Both Carroll and Wilson are answering the demands of the financial and corporate elite, which is insisting on a drastic restructuring of state finances. Victoria's November 12 pre-election budget update projected a cumulative cash deficit of $33 billion over four years, with net debt approaching $200 billion by 2030 and annual interest payments reaching almost $12 billion.

On November 12, Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Sally Curtain declared: "Victoria's road to prosperity must start with tough decisions today." Two weeks earlier, more than 100 prominent business figures and other wealthy Victorians issued an open letter demanding a plan to reduce state debt without further increasing taxes.

Carroll had immediately responded to that letter by declaring: "They know in me they have a pro-business, pro-growth Premier."

Carroll's government is already implementing a $4 billion austerity program, involving the destruction of around 1,000 public sector jobs and hundreds of executive positions.

Since becoming premier in July, he has announced the elimination of another 140 executive roles, further reductions in departmental spending and the abolition or merger of government agencies. Labor has also outlined $2 billion in cuts to expenditure on the Suburban Rail Loop.

It is proceeding with the demolition of all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne, in a massive assault on the vulnerable sections of the working class, directly benefitting the property developers.

Last week, the government revealed it would raid $1.3 billion from WorkSafe Victoria, the state's workers' compensation authority, to prop up its budget. This follows Labor's earlier assault on the compensation scheme, which restricted access to benefits for workers suffering psychological injuries.

Carroll's references to "tough decisions" was a signal that these already brutal measures are just the beginning.

Much of the media coverage of the launches buried this obvious point, instead promoting the healthcare promises that Carroll unveiled.

At Sunday's launch, he pledged $1.17 billion for 100,000 additional elective surgeries over four years, claiming this would halve hospital waiting lists. Another $195 million was promised for 500,000 specialist appointments.

The pledges are an indictment of Labor's own record after 12 years in office. More than 70,000 Victorians are waiting for planned surgery, while overcrowded emergency departments and chronic staffing shortages plague the public hospital system. Even if fulfilled, Labor's promise of 25,000 additional operations annually, compared with around 218,000 already performed each year, would be a drop in the ocean considering the scale of the crisis.

A November *Guardian* investigation found that more than 10,000 patients spent over 24 hours in Victorian emergency departments during 2025–26. In August, Australian Medical

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Association Victoria president Dr Simon Judkins described such delays as evidence of a "highly dysfunctional system." In October, Associate Professor Mark Putland, Victorian chair of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, warned that the state's health system was at a "tipping point."

Underscoring the absence of any alternative within the official election campaign, Liberal leader Jess Wilson, who is exploiting widespread anger over the cost-of-living crisis and Labor's record, was even more explicit in outlining a sweeping offensive against the working class.

Wilson has pledged to impose a decade-long public sector hiring freeze, which the Liberals claim will eliminate $22 billion in expenditure. The freeze would cover 46 government departments and agencies, with positions left vacant as workers retire or resign. She has also promised to return the state budget to a cash surplus by 2032, slash taxes and sell off almost $2 billion in public land and assets, including the Melbourne Wholesale Market.

At Sunday's launch, Wilson insisted that repairing the state's finances will not be "quick or easy," promising to "rein in back-office bureaucracy and stop wasteful spending." These are barely disguised declarations that public sector workers and essential services will be targeted.

Wilson devoted much of her launch to a punitive law-and-order agenda. She announced a $60 million boot camp for "offenders" aged 14 to 17 at a former prison near Shepparton, reiterated her pledge to recruit 3,000 additional police and promised to introduce "adult crime, adult time" sentencing laws before Christmas.

The program closely parallels that of the far-right One Nation party, which held its campaign launch on October 3. One Nation has likewise pledged to eliminate government agencies and public sector jobs and reduce business taxes. Its platform calls for harsher sentences for "young offenders," including prosecuting children as adults for serious violent crimes and lowering the age of criminal responsibility to just 10.

The convergence is particularly significant given the Liberals' recent agreement to direct preferences to One Nation. The two parties are advancing overlapping programs, while competing to present themselves as the most determined opponents of Labor.

At a more fundamental level, the convergence between the Liberals and One Nation is itself based on deepening policies already introduced by Labor. The government has imposed sweeping public sector cuts and, amid a sustained campaign of hysteria over youth crime, introduced harsher sentencing laws, tightened bail restrictions and expanded police powers.

To the extent that Labor is more coy about the cuts that it would introduce if reelected, that is solely because of the depth of its crisis. The measures being openly discussed by Wilson and One Nation would be enacted by Labor, as its record amply demonstrates.

The de facto unity ticket on austerity between the major parties and One Nation underscores the fraud of claims by the Greens and the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists (VS) that the election will resolve anything for workers.

The Greens, whatever their populist posturing, are a capitalist party with a long record of collaborating with big business Labor governments. VS is exploiting a growing attraction to socialism, while peddling the fraud that a "better, fairer Victoria" is possible within a parliamentary establishment that is openly pledged to massive cuts.

The objective function of the Greens and VS is to subordinate workers and youth to an official set-up, which as this election demonstrates, is both in a major crisis and is hurtling rapidly to the right.

This lurch to the right is not confined to Victoria. In every state and federally, governments are seeking to make workers pay for mounting public debt—substantially the product of subsidies and tax concessions to big business—and the underlying crisis of capitalism that it expresses.

This is being spearheaded by the federal Labor government. It is pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into military spending, including the AUKUS nuclear submarine program and preparations for a US-led war against China, kicking hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people off the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The essential program of the ruling elite, in Australia as internationally, is the enrichment of an obscenely wealthy oligarchy, a war against the working class and imperialist war abroad.

The rotten character of the official Victorian election underscores the importance of the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is standing Morgan Peach and Peter Byrne in the Northern Metropolitan Region.

The SEP is standing to politically prepare the working class for the struggles to come, whatever the outcome on November 28, including by fighting to organise workers independently through rank-and-file committees and by promoting, as widely as possible, the revolutionary socialist program that is the only answer to a capitalist system hurtling to barbarism.

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