

The Australian Labor Party's election debacle and the fight against the far-right

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Saturday's Australian federal election resulted in a devastating defeat for the Labor Party opposition and the return to power of the far-right Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Morrison will likely be able to form a government with a slim majority in the House of Representatives, the lower house of the Australian parliament. The Senate will probably be controlled by independents and right-wing populists.

All of the media pundits predicted a sweeping Labor victory. Before vote counting began, Labor leader Bill Shorten was widely presented as the presumptive prime minister. By the end of Saturday night, he had stood down as party leader, having overseen Labor's defeat in an "unlosable election."

The press has noted the parallels with the 2016 US election, when Hillary Clinton, who was universally depicted as the president in waiting, was defeated by the fascistic Republican candidate Donald Trump.

Morrison is not Trump and Shorten is not Clinton, but changing what needs to be changed, the same underlying social and political dynamics were at work.

The vote was a massive repudiation of Labor's claims to have policies that would lead to "fairness." Throughout the election, Shorten, along with his allies in the corporatised trade unions, denounced tax breaks for the rich and declared that Labor would govern in the interests of working people. But after decades of imposing the dictates of the financial elite, Labor could not make any credible appeal to workers and young people.

The Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, in office from 2007 to 2013, were among the most right-wing in Australian history.

At that time, Labor formed the government after a decade of Coalition rule, declaring that it would defend

workers' rights. It then banned virtually all industrial action, aligned Australia with US plans for war against China, reopened squalid refugee detention camps on remote Pacific islands and slashed funding for public education, health care and welfare.

In working class electorates on Saturday there were substantial swings away from Labor, as workers rejected its paltry election promises as doing nothing to address their pressing social needs for jobs, wage increases and better services. The swings against Labor were highest in regional and working class electorates that have borne the brunt of decades of job-destruction and are mired in a deepening social crisis.

Labor is rightly regarded by many as a party of big business. It committed to a budget surplus twice as large as the Coalition's, signaling deep cuts to public spending. It presented itself as a "unified" party that could govern in the interests of the corporate elite and pledged to maintain military spending at 2 percent of gross domestic product.

In Australia, as all over the world, millions of workers and young people are moving to the left and becoming increasingly hostile to capitalism. However, in the absence of a mass socialist movement, the working class is left with a Morrison government that will introduce major tax cuts for big business, deepen the alliance with American imperialism and seek to make the working class pay for the accelerating slowdown of the Australian economy.

Morrison is an extreme right-wing evangelical Christian. As immigration minister, he whipped up anti-immigrant xenophobia, rode roughshod over basic democratic rights and was responsible for the brutal treatment of refugees in detention camps. Both the Liberals and Labor have helped create the reactionary climate in which far-right and fascistic parties have been emboldened, even though their vote increase in

the election was minimal.

The election outcome is yet another exposure of the bankrupt claims peddled by pseudo-left groups and the unions that the rise of the far-right can be opposed by supporting capitalist parties such as the labour parties of Australia and Britain, the Democrats in the US and social-democratic parties in Europe.

Around the world, extreme right-wing parties, actively promoted by the state apparatus, are exploiting a social crisis produced by the sweeping austerity measures imposed by so-called “centre-left” parties and governments. As a result, fascistic parties are winning a growing number of seats in parliament, and in some countries, participating in government.

In Britain, the deeply divided Conservative government of Theresa May could not remain in office if not for the servility and cowardice of the Labour Party of Jeremy Corbyn. In France, the “moderate” government of Emmanuel Macron is imposing sweeping cuts on behalf of the banks, enabling the fascistic National Front to posture as a champion of ordinary people.

In the US, the Trump administration has been emboldened by the refusal of the Democrats to oppose its attacks on immigrants and its escalating military threats. Instead, the Democrats combine a McCarthyite anti-Russian campaign with bankrupt identity politics, aimed at advancing the interests of affluent layers of the upper-middle class and dividing workers on the basis of race, gender and sexual orientation.

The Australian election result is an ominous warning that far-right forces may likely make further advances in the upcoming European elections. It is a signal that the Democratic Party campaign for the 2020 US presidential election, marked by appeals for “national unity” and anti-Russian hysteria, will only strengthen Trump.

The only way to fight the danger of the far right is by building an independent political movement of the working class aimed at abolishing the capitalist profit system—the source of social inequality and war. The objective basis for such a movement exists in the immense hostility of ordinary people to the official political set-up, and the reemergence of explosive class struggles internationally.

In the Australian election, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) won important support from workers, students

and young people looking for a genuine alternative to capitalism. With vote-counting incomplete, SEP candidates in the four House of Representatives seats where the party stood each received more than 500 votes. In the New South Wales Senate, over 1,000 workers and youth voted for the SEP. In Victoria, the figure is more than 5,000.

We appeal to those workers and youth, and everyone seeking a genuine alternative, to take the next step by studying the SEP’s program and building it as the new revolutionary socialist leadership of the working class.

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