

Workers' Liberty



The emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself

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Queensland labour movement should call a "refounding"

The result of the Queensland state election on 24 March 2012 was the worst electoral crash for Labor in Australian history. It was one of the worst electoral setbacks for an established social democratic party ever, anywhere in the world.

Labor is now reduced to seven seats in Queensland's 89-seat parliament, in maybe the most "Labourite" polity in the world. Campbell Newman's Liberal National Party has 78 seats.

Queensland had the world's first ever labour parliamentary government, in 1899. Labor has ruled in Queensland ever since 1915, with only one long break and two short ones (1929-32 and 1996-8).

The long break came between 1957 and 1989, for readily understandable reasons. In April 1957 the Labor Party, on the instigation of the unions, expelled Labor premier Vince Gair, all the Labor members of the state Cabinet bar one, and the majority of the Labor members of the legislative assembly, because Gair had openly defied Labor policy, especially for introducing a right for workers to three weeks' paid holiday each year.

Gair's breakaway Queensland Labor Party, heavily supported by the Catholic Church, took a good chunk of votes from Labor in the ensuing election, and (partly thanks to electoral gerrymandering), the National Party then ruled until 1989, most of the time under the leadership of Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Since 1989 Labor has won every election, losing office only when the Nationals briefly formed a minority government in 1996-8.

Now Labor is down to 27% of the first-preference vote - less than the 29% which Labor got in 1957 (when Gair's breakaway got 23%). From 1915 to 2009, Labor got over 40% in every other poll, and usually more like 50% or more, with only a couple of exceptions (36% in 1974, when the federal Labor government of Gough Whitlam was mired in economic crisis; 39% in 1998, when the far-right One Nation party briefly scored well).

No consolation can be sought in the illusion that the revolt against Labour was at least incipiently left-wing, and so, given more effort in left-of-Labor electoral activity, could be reshaped into a step forward. The Socialist Alliance (now much dominated by the Castroite former DSP) ran in three electorates,

getting 1.9% in South Brisbane, 1.6% in Sandgate, and 0.6% in Dalrymple. The score was up a smidgeon on 2009 (South Brisbane 1.5%, Sandgate 1.3%), but shows no upward trend. In 2006 the SA got 1.9% in Brisbane Central. In 2004 it got 3.1% in Inala, 2.9% in South Brisbane, and 1.6% in Brisbane Central.

The Greens, who sometimes attract left-of-Labor voters, got 7.3% of the first-preference votes this time, down from 8.4% in 2009 and 8.0% in 2006.

The lost Labor votes which did not go straight to the LNP went to a right-wing populist splinter from the Nationals, Katter's Australian Party (12%, two seats). Since voting is compulsory, there was no element of abstentions shaping the result. (Spoiled ballots were only marginally more numerous than in 2009 and 2006).

The Queensland Council of Unions "withdrew support" from the KAP only eight days before the poll, citing the KAP's policy to repeal Queensland law allowing same-sex civil unions. The LNP has also said it may repeal that law, and street parties were called in some areas after 24 March to celebrate the prospect of repeal.

The QCU produced a bland "Charter for Working Australians" which was endorsed by outgoing Labor premier Anna Bligh and 19 KAP candidates.

The electoral shift cannot be explained by one-off events. Australia has been the only one of the richer countries to avoid a recession since 2007. The Chinese government's vast fixed-investment drive has pulled in rising primary-product exports from Australia - and, notably, from Queensland.

The federal Labor government is unpopular. A poll on the same weekend as the Queensland state election gave it only 28% of the first-preference vote. If Julia Gillard's Labor federal administration, precariously dependent on two independent MPs for its parliamentary majority, should fall, then Labor could suffer a similar wipe-out federally.

Again, no "blip" accounts for that. Gillard's carbon tax is unpopular, but nothing special compared to mild or notional "green" policies legislated by other richer capitalist countries.

The merger in 2008 to form the Queensland "Liberal National Party" helped the conservatives. In Queensland, unlike other states, the (*cont'd page 2*)

Queensland (cont'd)

Nationals rather than the Liberals have been the dominant conservative party, and for a long time after the collapse in a huge corruption scandal of the Bjelke-Petersen regime they were tainted as seedy rural bigots.

The new LNP leader, Campbell Newman, formerly Liberal mayor of Brisbane, appears more presentable, and he had a "good crisis" during the early-2011 Brisbane floods. But then so did Anna Bligh.

The short answer must be that the erosion of labour-movement politics over recent decades has produced such enfeeblement that relatively small shocks can produce dramatic collapses. Given the lack of alternatives, Queensland Labor may recover a bit in the coming years when people rebel against the accelerated neo-liberal assault which Newman is certain to pursue. But it will remain shaky and fragile until the erosion is reversed.

Labour-movement politics have been eroded by four mutually-reinforcing drifts:

- The full-scale conversion of the Labor leadership to neo-liberal policies;
- The weakening of trade-union organisation and combativity;
- The lack of political assertiveness by the unions;
- The decline of the Labor Party's internal and activist life (and, more recently, also of left-of-Labor activist life).

None of those drifts results from invincible economic trends. The industrial working class in Queensland remains numerous and of huge potential strategic strength. Important battles still happen. New young left-wing activists still come into politics. But the drifts have happened.

The immediate background is that straight after the 2009 election, the Bligh government moved to reverse its election promises and to sell off a huge section of the state's public assets: Queensland Rail freight, major ports, motorways and forest plantations.

Peter Simpson, state secretary of the left-wing Electrical Trades Union, recalled that he had called on Anna Bligh to stand down as Labor leader three years ago.

"If she had resigned when people were asking her to and changed direction on the asset sales, we wouldn't be in the horrible mess that we're in today. I still think they would have ... but they wouldn't have lost by this margin."

Andrew Dettmer, state secretary of the AMWU, leader of the official Left faction in the Queensland Labor Party, and president of Queensland Labor, told the press that "many in the party and affiliated unions felt disenfranchised by Ms Bligh's decision to sell off assets... I think the lead in the saddlebags for the ALP was privatisation".

Those diagnoses miss out the fact that the unions, though opposing the privatisation drive, failed to use their positions inside the Labor Party to stop it.

The ETU campaigned more boldly - but in the form of paying for billboard ads calling on voters not to back

Anna Bligh, i.e. presumably to vote for a (any?) non-Labor party. The Labor Party expelled Peter Simpson, though there have since been negotiations about readmitting him.

Activists should campaign to break the stunned silence prevailing in the Queensland labour movement since 24 March, and demand the convening of an emergency conference of the movement to take stock and to map out a re-founding and revival of working-class political representation in the state.
by Martin Thomas



Queensland ETU billboard poster. The ETU was the only union to campaign boldly against privatisation. But it did so in a way that was bound to be counter-productive politically, rather than by rousing the labour movement to overturn Bligh.

The unions and Labor

Comment from "Workers' Bush Telegraph" (Ian Curr)

There is a prevailing belief in the ALP that they can spin their way out of any situation. This sometimes works with people without ideology or class consciousness. The economic crisis has shaken people's faith in capitalism mainly because poverty means there is less access to consumer goods.

So Anna Bligh and her ministers used spin rather than fix the dams, the payroll system and the hospitals. The government dumped the fuel subsidy saying that the state's finances were in poor shape.

The ALP-in-government could always invent a story that would explain any given situation.

The pièce de résistance was Bligh's losing speech at the convention centre when she said that their loss was inevitable because they had been in power for so long. Yet Labor ruled Queensland from 1915 to 1957! 40 years with only a brief period out of government at the onset of the great depression in 1930.

In contrast Bligh (2009-2012) and Beattie (1998-2009) were only in power for a fraction of that time.

Labor's loss had little to do with longevity or the dominance of the AWU/factional system, but a lot to do with policies.

The three main factions in the ALP in Queensland are Labor Forum/ Australian Workers Union (Bill Ludwig, AWU), Labor Unity (David Hanna, BLF) and the Left (sic) [Andrew Dettmer, AMWU]

No faction in the Labor Party effectively opposed the sale of public assets at the 2010 state ALP conference that began the Labor slide.

The Left faction (sic) even withdrew its vote on the floor of the conference. The argument in favour of the

sale was to retire public debt so that the government could build more infrastructure.

That argument could easily be rebutted in a state whose major economic activity is moving minerals from one place to another. Queensland Rail coal and mineral freight had subsidized public infrastructure for the past 50 years.

"Bligh won the privatisation vote at the ALP conference, held over the June 6-8 weekend [2009], by 207 votes to 156. Another 44 delegates abstained, most of them from unions in Bligh's own left faction, which opposed the sale but did not want to embarrass her. These included the nurses union and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union." (Direct Action)

What all factions in the ALP failed to realise when they voted to sell QRail was they were signing the death warrant of two ALP governments – State (Bligh) and Federal (Gillard).

The only union that attempted to mobilize politically against the sale was the Electrical Trades Union (Peter Simpson) the union that Bjelke-Petersen put to the sword in 1986. The ETU put up billboards saying that Anna Bligh had sold us out.

The unions made the collective mistake of falling in behind the ALP at the election they should have run independent labor candidates against the government to retain public assets and to maintain better health, education and energy system.

As it turned out the ALP lost 1 in every 3 of its metropolitan votes to the Liberals and a similar ratio of its regional votes to Katter in the bush.

The ALP government failed in service delivery and incompetent ministers (i.e. Paul Lucas) appointed through the factional system contributed to this.

The focus of the incoming LNP government is service delivery which may work so long as there is not another economic crisis.

Will an extra-parliamentary opposition emerge to oppose conservative government?

Martin Thomas : The question I'd add is: wouldn't it make more sense to demand the unions vote down Bligh on privatisation - which they clearly could have done - rather than accept they'd vote within the ALP for privatisation and suggest they then set up a new party to campaign against the privatisation policy they'd just voted for?

Women's rights in North Africa *(cont'd from back page)*

To head off a revolution, the King made concessions and allowed the formation of a government led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party.

Bassima Hakkaoui, minister of women and the family — and the only woman among the 29 ministers in the government — acknowledged that there was a "real problem" and called for a debate on changing the law. But Hakkaoui also claimed that Amina Filali had consented to the marriage.

And Justice Minister El Mostafa Ramid denied Amina Filali had been raped.

17-year-old Layla Belmahi, a founder of a women's rights group denounced the Minister:

"He was talking about it like it was something that was normal, that the only thing that really shocked him was the fact that she killed herself.

"The problem wasn't the fact that she killed herself. It was that she was forced to marry her rapist."

Two Tunisian bloggers, Jabeur Mejri and Ghazi Beji, have been given long prison sentences after they posted a cartoon of Muhammad on Facebook.

Ghazi Beji is still being looked for by police, while Jabeur Mejri faces seven years in jail.

On Sunday 25 March 10,000 marched in the capital, Tunis, demanding the country introduce Islamic sharia law. The ultra-conservative Salafists are pressing the leading party in the government, Ennahda, a somewhat milder Islamist party, to make the changes. Some marchers demanded a war on Jews – alarming Tunisia's Jews, a 1500 minority among a population of ten million.

Also last month, Salafist students at Manouba University on the outskirts of Tunis fought secular students and burnt the Tunisian flag.

Last year, Salafists protested outside Nessma TV when it screened the French-Iranian film *Persepolis*. They also attacked a cinema that was showing "Ni Dieu, Ni Maître," ("No God, No Master"), a film by secularist filmmaker Nadia al-Fani. Some Salafists were jailed.

Ennahda, which won 41% of the seats in the constituent assembly elected last October, declares that the new constitution will not base Tunisia's law on sharia.

The Islamists have not gone uncontested. A large march took place in Tunis to celebrate International Women's day.

On Monday 9 April 2000 protesters marching from the nearby headquarters of the main trade union federation, the UGTT, which has been at the forefront of opposition to the Islamist-led government, fought riot police at the interior ministry on Bourguiba Avenue.

On Saturday 7 April the police had attacked and dispersed a march by jobless workers in central Tunis and the unions were demanding their right to protest.

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ACTU Insecure work enquiry overlooks power to hire and fire

At least 2.2 million workers, or about a quarter of the workforce in Australia, are in casual or temporary jobs. This is the insecure work covered by the ACTU enquiry which heard submissions and evidence from unions and individual workers, and closed in March.

Meanwhile the MUA and the CFMEU were locked in disagreement over enterprise agreement provisions that impact staffing levels with Patrick (Asciano) and BHP – Mitsubishi respectively and Toyota issued 350 compulsory redundancies. Barry O’Farrell has got legislation through NSW Parliament to strengthen his power to force redundancies.

Closures, relocations and public sector cuts mean that thousands of supposedly permanent workers are either being made redundant or fear redundancy, extending the experience of insecurity beyond the scope of the ACTU enquiry.

MUA and CFMEU members taking industrial action to improve their job security have been confronted by intransigent management. Asciano says that MUA demands “would limit the company’s ability to manage its own business”. Fair Work Australia was poised to rule against the MUA. (AFR 14 April, p.10) This is despite the Labor government’s expansion of “allowable matters” to include staffing levels in EAs. The point of the allowed matters still has to be won.

In this context the options in the ACTU paper for the enquiry sound bland – improvements through bargaining (at workplace and industry level), through awards, policy and legislation.

Changes won through bargaining and awards will be no better than the balance of power between employers and unions can force from employers. And legislation and policy changes require a political party in government to make them. Ideally we need government by a party that is accountable to the labour movement and able to convince the majority of Australians that their interests are best protected by siding with labour rather than the tiny minority of employers.

Increased insecurity at work reflects the relative increase in the power of employers and decline in the power of workers via their unions. A centre-piece of tackling insecure work is rebuilding the strength of the union movement to resist management prerogative. This means making a principled commitment, and requires organising, recruitment to unions, including new ways of organising casual, temporary and insecure workers.

Casuals are less likely to be union members, which limits their industrial strength, and as casualisation has grown, it is a factor in shrinking union density. ABS statistics have shown that 37% permanent employees were union members compared to 13% of casual workers.

In August 2010, of 2.2 million casuals 55% were female, and 59% were under 35 years old. A large

proportion of young workers lack experience of secure employment, and retiring permanent workers seem to be being replaced by non-permanent workers.

The equal top two occupations for casuals were retail sales and labourers (42% total) and the equal top two industries for casual employment were retail, and tourism and hospitality (38% total)

So young workers, women workers, retail, tourism and hospitality, and labourers all need to be prioritized, and strategies found to unionise them.

And more, unions need to commit to not reaching agreements or settling disputes unless serious gains are won for job security. It is at the peril of the whole workforce that employers get away with denying some workers the better conditions and standards of permanent workers.

by Janet Burstall

Fight for women's rights in North Africa

by Dan Katz

On 10 March 16-year-old Amina Filali killed herself by swallowing rat poison.

Amina had been badly beaten during a forced marriage to Mustapha Kellak, a man who had raped her. Although there have been some limited legal improvement in the position of women in Morocco, the state still allows a rapist to marry an underage victim as a way of avoiding prosecution. The law — known as Article 475 — says a “kidnapper” of a minor can marry his victim so that dishonour is not brought on her family.

Legislation designed to outlaw all forms of violence against women, planned since 2006, has yet to appear.

Amina’s parents say a local court pressured them to accept the marriage. They are from a backward, conservative rural area.

On 17 March several hundred women’s rights activists demonstrated in the Moroccan capital, Rabat, demanding that the man who raped Amina be jailed and that Article 475 be abolished. Outrage continued after the Al-Massae newspaper invited the rapist to discuss the matter at a conference in Casablanca.

Eric Goldstein from Human Rights Watch says that many other barriers to equality persist in the Moroccan legal code, including a provision that makes it a crime to give refuge to married women who have escaped their husbands.

Another article in the code makes sex outside of marriage a crime. If a woman reports a rape, and she doesn’t prove her case, she is then admitting to sex outside marriage, opening up the possibility of prosecution.

Women’s rights in Morocco are becoming a battleground between liberals and the left, and the Islamists who have been brought to power in the wake of the Arab Spring. (*cont’d page 3*)