

Workers' Liberty



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

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Rudd-Gillard: a shift to the right which looks "left"

Until 23 June Kevin Rudd was prime minister of Australia, and the media were dismissing chatter about challenges to his position. The next day, as academic Nick Economou put it: "He's a goner. You can stick a fork in him".

Rudd was toppled by a revolt of Labor MPs and replaced by his former deputy Julia Gillard. Although Rudd said he wanted to remain a minister, Gillard has excluded him from her new cabinet. Rudd was publicly reduced to tears.

Bob Hawke was voted out by Labor MPs and replaced by Paul Keating as prime minister in 1991, after eight years in office. Vince Gair, Labor premier of Queensland, was expelled by the Labor Party while in office in April 1957 for defying trade-union demands. But Rudd's fall was startling.

When Rudd became prime minister in December 2007, he announced that he would scrap the long-standing Labor Party rule that Labor Cabinets are elected by the MPs, and appoint the Cabinet himself.

In fact he could not change the rule just by an announcement, and the issue was fudged by Rudd announcing a Cabinet list and the MPs voting to approve it. But, as lawyer Anthony Forsyth pointed out back in 2007, "Rudd [was] following the lead of former British prime minister Tony Blair, who faced down unions by promising there would be 'no going back' to pre-Thatcher industrial confrontation".

Under Rudd, major government decisions were made within a so-called "kitchen cabinet" of just four people (which included Gillard). Even cabinet ministers found out about new policy in their areas only through press announcements.

Rudd had made himself unpopular both with Labor MPs and with people generally by his autocratic style. Australian Labor Party leaders have long been unworried about betraying the

working class, but until Rudd they generally respected the "party room" (of Labor MPs).

When Rudd started to appear vulnerable, he was almost without defenders. Major trade-union figures, like Australian Workers' Union leader Paul Howes, were heavily involved in ousting Rudd, so in a way it was a reassertion of control by the labour movement over the political leadership.

Rudd is a long-term right-winger. On ousting Kim Beazley as Labor leader in 2006, he changed Labor policy to water down commitments to repeal the WorkChoices and other anti-union laws brought in by the Liberal-National government of 1996-2007.

Julia Gillard made her way up through the Labor Party as a member of the Left faction. She is an avowed atheist, while Rudd is a sanctimonious Christian. She is Australia's first woman prime minister, and an unmarried woman at that.

It is not surprising that Labor's opinion-poll rating has improved markedly since Rudd went - there is now talk of Gillard going for an early election - and even many left-minded people saw Gillard as a change for the better.

The evidence, however, is that Gillard will shift Labor further to the right, and was pushed forward to replace Rudd for exactly that reason. Key figures on the Labor right liked how right-wing Rudd was, but didn't like his inflexibility and autocratic manner. Gillard may deal with Labor MPs more cooperatively, but there is no evidence that she will be any more responsive than Rudd to the demands of the wider labour movement.

Rudd's downfall began with a confrontation with Australia's mining industry bosses over a new tax on their profits which he wanted to bring in. The bosses, supported by the media, won wide public assent for the claim that the tax

would harm job prospects, and Labor's poll scores dropped.

Within days of replacing Rudd, Gillard had scaled down the tax and cut a deal with the mining bosses.

Gillard has also signalled a more restrictive policy on immigration. Rudd had welcomed large-scale immigration, saying that he "believed in a big Australia". Gillard declared on 27 June: "I don't believe in a big Australia. Kevin Rudd indicated that he had a view about a big Australia. I'm indicating a different approach".

Rudd, while a friend of Israel, was much friendlier to Palestinian rights than the Liberal/National government had been. Gillard is, in effect, a Netanyahu supporter.

The Right faction and Australia's most powerful right-wing union, the Australian Workers' Union, were central to engineering Rudd's downfall. They also pulled in votes from the Left faction in Victoria.

According to the Sydney Morning Herald, Rudd ended up with only the "hard left" scrabbling for numbers to back him. ("Hard left" here has to be read as an extremely loose term!)

The notionally "left" leadership of Jeff Lawrence and Ged Kearney in the ACTU has responded passively to the ousting, as the ACTU did to Rudd's swinging Labor to the right in 2006-7.

"We will stay focussed on preventing the [Liberal-National] Coalition from reintroducing WorkChoices and attacking the rights of Australian workers", said the ACTU. "Unions will continue working with Julia Gillard and the Labor Government to secure the economic recovery and ensure it delivers strong growth in jobs and benefits all Australians..."

The chief lessons here are two.

First, that formal "Left" affiliations guarantee nothing, especially in the context of the Australian Labor Party, where "Left"/"Right" conflict is usually more about haggling over who will get what position than about debate on politics.

Second, that a trade union movement which confines itself, politically, to passive lobbying will find the terrain on which it lobbies moved further and further to the right by the pressure of the wealthy classes, who are better-placed to lobby. The balance can be changed only by a union movement willing to go out and mobilise the numbers, in the working class, which are its reserve of potential strength, and restoring workers' rights.

Marxist reading group in Sydney

The reading group is studying "The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capital", a new book by David Harvey.

An optional companion reading is David Harvey's classic "The Limits to Capital" (1982).

More about Harvey and Marxist economics -

<http://www.workersliberty.org/harvey>

We are meeting fortnightly on Tuesdays upstairs at Better Read Than Dead, 265 King St, Newtown, NSW 2042. More: call 0439 640 118.

Gramsci reading group in Brisbane

The group is studying Antonio Gramsci's "Prison Notebooks". <http://gramscinotebooks.wordpress.com>

Join AusIraq

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 anti-war activists have worked to promote Australia/Iraq trade union solidarity. AusIraq has raised funds to support unions in Iraq. AusIraq is currently forging direct links between Australian and Iraqi unions. Contact Lynn: 0439 640 118.



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The IMF/EU package for Greece, and why it will help German and French banks rather than the people

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