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November 23, 2007

Retrieved on 11th October 2021 from anarkismo.net

Article by Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group (MACG)
about the upcoming federal elections in Australia, in Saturday, 24
November. 2007. Published in “The Anvil” No 4 (Nov.-Dec. 2007)

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John Howard, Liberal Party Prime Minister of Australia, is on the nose with workers and could very well lose the election on 24 November. Like the rest of the working class, we’d be delighted to see the back of him. And if the Liberal Party can be demolished in a landslide, so much the better.

There is a problem, however, with the strategy of voting Howard out. You have to vote “for” a given candidate or party, not against, so to vote Howard out requires voting for somebody else – and this means endorsing them as the appropriate government of Australia. So let’s think this through.

First cab off the rank, of course, is the ALP. Rather than recount its appalling history, we’ll just concentrate on the present and warn against viewing the past with a rosy nostalgia. The present, however, is ugly enough.

What is Kevin Rudd, ALP leader, doing? Acting like the leader of an Amateur Liberal Party, that’s what. Apart from a selected handful of policies, he completely lines up with Howard. Virtually every time Howard says something reactionary, Rudd stands up immediately and says “We totally agree. Our policy is identical”.

Support for rich private schools? Totally agree. An environmentally destructive pulp mill? Totally agree. Locking up refugees? Totally agree. Invading Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, stealing their land, garnisheeing all welfare payments and smearing the entire Indigenous population as child molesters? Totally agree. And the list goes on.

The most unpopular policy of the Government is Work Choices and the ALP is promising to keep most of it. Virtually the only changes they propose are a phasing out of AWAs and a partial re-introduction of protection against unfair dismissal. Crucially, our right to strike remains so restricted as to be virtually useless and the union-busting Australian Building and Construction Commission remains in place. Finally, on the Iraq War and on climate change, the differences between Liberal and Labor are far less than the similarities — they both support the imperialist “War on Terror” and rely on free markets and “clean coal” to save the planet from global warming.

Many workers, disgusted by the ALP, are turning to the Greens. While they are better than Labor on the policies above, however, the Greens have problems of their own. Because they still support capitalism, their solutions to the world’s problems will have to be paid for by the workers. The massive reductions in greenhouse emissions necessary to stop global warming, for example, will have to be paid for somehow. Under capitalism, the working class will pay the bulk of the bill, since business has the power to evade or pass on the costs. Thus capitalism can play no part in a sustainable future, so the Greens, despite their intentions, are peddling dangerous illusions.

And finally, voters in some electorates might be able to find a socialist on their ballot paper. In terms of practical policies, they are mostly similar to the Greens. The most obvious exception is foreign affairs, where they are more consistently anti-war. Their major difference is that, unlike the Greens, they put forward socialism as an ultimate solution. The problem with voting socialist,

though, is that you can’t get it through Parliament. A “socialism from above” would be no socialism at all. The new bosses would wear a government uniform — double the authority and accountable only to themselves.

What, then, is to be done? We have to recognise that “Who should we vote for?” is the wrong question. The ruling class will never let itself be voted out of power. Capitalism and its masters are global and will continue to attack wages, rights and conditions and tear up the planet in endless pursuit of profits. And finally, whoever we vote for will use those votes against us, claiming legitimacy for their anti-worker agenda.

Workers should instead ask “What should we do?” We need to build grassroots resistance to the Government (whichever party is running it) by organising in our communities, our streets and, most importantly, our workplaces. Further, we need to learn the law of solidarity, that an injury to one is an injury to all, and to organise on the basis of federalism and direct democracy.

We, the working class, are the alternative. In the short term, our grassroots struggle is the only thing that can extract real gains under any government. In the long term, the movement we build will make a revolution and the values on which we build it will become the values of the new world, a stateless society of liberty, equality and solidarity.

Let’s vote for ourselves.