

Australia: Queensland Labor government's desperate "cost-of-living" budget fails to reverse collapsing support

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In office since 2015, the Queensland state Labor government, now headed by Premier Steven Miles, is widely slated to lose October's state election in a landslide, with a predicted primary vote of just 27 percent.

That is despite releasing a budget this month that desperately adopted token measures to appear to address the most severe cost-of-living crisis and decline of living conditions for the working class in generations.

The promises include rebates on electricity bills, reducing public transport fares to 50 cents for six months, trimming car registration costs, providing vouchers for children's recreational activities and nominal increases in health funding. All these proposals are inadequate and temporary, with most expiring shortly after the scheduled state election.

A review of the published budget papers reveals that the lion's share of the budget will provide \$107 billion for infrastructure projects, and \$26 billion for energy-related projects, favouring mining and other big business interests, along with large increases for the police and prisons.

Labor's collapsing support in Queensland has ominous implications for the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which must call a national election before May. At the same time, it points to a deepening crisis of the entire political system.

Labor's longevity in office in Queensland has largely been due to hatred of the preceding Liberal National Party (LNP) government of Campbell Newman (2012–2015), which initiated savage cuts to public services.

Labor won the last state election in October 2020 also on the back of the measures that it initially took to slow the transmission of COVID-19 during that year. It later joined every other government in letting the coronavirus loose, for the sake of corporate profit, with disastrous consequences in terms of deaths and illness.

Labor did not reverse the cuts made by Newman, and imposed years of sub-inflationary pay rises on large sections

of workers, including health, education, and other social services. This combined with an abject failure to address the cost-of-living crisis, dropping COVID protections and public health measures, imprisoning growing numbers of children, and neglecting large increases in homelessness have led to it becoming widely discredited.

Miles was installed last December via a backroom operation in which his increasingly unpopular predecessor, Annastacia Palaszczuk was pushed out by the party powerbrokers and trade union bureaucrats who control the government.

In March, two by-elections, the first elections during Miles's leadership, produced staggering swings against Labor, mostly going to various independents, not the LNP.

In the Brisbane western suburb of Inala, which has among the lowest income levels and highest unemployment rates in Queensland, Labor's primary vote plummeted by around 30 percentage points to less than 35 percent.

Nearby, in Ipswich West, which covers outer-suburban working-class neighbourhoods and some semi-rural areas, Labor's primary vote crashed by about 15 percentage points, also to around 35 percent, allowing the LNP to gain the seat.

A YouGov opinion poll in April gave Miles had a net negative approval rating of -22 percent, the worst result for a Queensland premier in 20 years

Nervousness over the growing anger of the working class, compounded by the state and federal Labor governments' association with the Israeli genocide in Gaza, clearly motivated the headline "cost of living" measures in the budget.

These concerns, however, are shared across all the capitalist parties, including the LNP, which is expected to win the October election. Its leader, David Cristafulli, pledged to retain the sops offered in the budget, despite media criticism of a "blowout budget."

The budget measures are a drop in the ocean of the problems confronting workers in Queensland. To cite some

statistics:

- Every night over 10,000 people are homeless in the state capital of Brisbane alone. Since 2017, during Labor's tenure, homelessness has increased by 22 percent, three times the national average.

Rental costs have increased by 30 percent since 2020, with 60 percent of low-income households facing unaffordable housing costs, and 15 percent suffering severe housing affordability stress.

- Running down of public housing has led to wait lists of over 43,000 for a public home, with just 4 percent of housing stock classified as social housing, a historic low.

- Large increases in average food prices, at least 10 percent since 2021, and higher for many staples, have caused record rates of hunger, with 1 in 5 Queensland residents facing food insecurity.

Similar disasters exist in the public health system. The budget promised a 10.6 percent annual increase in health funding, with a much-vaunted boost to hospital capacity by 2,200 beds, increased funding for elective surgeries, and \$1.7 billion over four years to research strategies for mitigating staffing shortages caused by the bad working conditions in healthcare facilities.

Once again, these proposals are temporary and insufficient. Queensland has failed to meet national targets for ambulance ramping, where patients are forced to remain in ambulances due to a lack of available hospital beds, for over seven years, according to the Australian Medical Association Queensland (AMAQ). Over 45 percent of patients waited more than 30 minutes in ambulances as of March, a record high.

More than 60,000 people are currently waiting to receive surgery, with waiting times especially horrendous in rural and regional parts of the state. In April, the AMAQ noted that less than one third of patients in central Queensland received needed surgeries within the recommended times, increasing the risk of disability and death.

The increases in spending on social services are a pittance compared to that for business. Of the extra \$107 billion to be spent over four years on infrastructure spending (nearly the same as the health budget in this period), \$5 billion will be for a single project, CopperString 2032, a proposed power line stretching across far north Queensland. The purpose of this project is to provide electricity to planned mines in areas with critical minerals.

In addition, \$7.1 billion will be spent on projects for the Brisbane Olympics in 2032, twice the amount proposed for housing programs.

Moreover, the government committed to funding an additional 900 police officers, bringing the total number to nearly 19,000 in a state of 5.5 million people. Some \$1.2

billion is to be spent for the new hires, upgraded regional police stations, and increased prison capacity, after Labor committed \$250 million last year for a new children's prison.

This is a major boost to police power under conditions of a deepening social crisis and rising political discontent. Last year, the Labor government twice suspended the state's Human Rights Act, to abolish limits on how long children can be held in adult detention centres and to punish criminal offenders aged as young as 10.

Labor's efforts to present the budget as a set of major social concessions have fallen flat. However, what is on the agenda is not simply a failure to address decades of austerity, but an acceleration of the attacks against the working class.

Much of the budget's coverage in the corporate media has made note of the fact that Labor will run a budget deficit for the year of \$2.6 billion, compared to the surplus of nearly \$14 billion delivered in 2023, largely based on coal and other mining revenues.

State Treasurer Cameron Dick claimed that Labor had "made the deliberate choice to put our budget into deficit, to help Queensland households keep their budgets in balance." It is clear, however, that these expenses are to be clawed back from workers, including through proposed cuts of up to \$3 billion from public service workers' conditions and wage increases.

Furthermore, the budget's predictions are based on high prices for mining exports, despite a worldwide economic slowdown, particularly in China which has served as a major export market and now faces escalating US trade sanctions. In fact, the Queensland Audit Office now expects that coal revenues alone will fall \$4 billion in the coming fiscal year 2024–25.

Under these conditions, the response of the incoming government, whether Labor or LNP, will be to further escalate attacks against workers, demanding that they pay for the profits of big business with their living and working conditions.



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