

Australian by-election: a microcosm of political alienation and hostility

Our reporters
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Werriwa residents spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters on a wide range of political issues at polling booths last Saturday in the western Sydney federal electorate, one of the poorest areas in Australia. The by-election revealed deep-seated anger against the major political parties, growing concern over increasing poverty and unemployment, and a willingness to debate and discuss the Socialist Equality Party's program.

While voters raised many issues with the WSWS, the most common sentiment was intense hostility towards the Howard government—in particular over the Iraq war and rising interest rates—and no confidence that the Australian Labor Party (ALP) offered any alternative.

Contrary to media claims that the election of a Labor Party candidate Chris Hayes represented a revival in support for the ALP, it was difficult to find any voters that had a “good word” for Labor. While some said that they had reluctantly voted for the ALP, out of inertia, no one suggested that Labor had any solution to the day-to-day difficulties or social problems they faced.

In nearly every conversation, there was deep skepticism towards anything the ALP said and real concerns about the New South Wales state Labor government's callous response to the tragic death of two youth who were killed in a high-speed police car chase in Macquarie Fields' Glenquarie public housing estate on February 25.

Four days of riots erupted after the police launched a provocative attack on local youth holding a wake. Labor Premier Bob Carr did not offer a word of remorse over the deaths but mobilised hundreds of heavily armed riot police, helicopters and other police resources to cordon off the area, launch raids and arrest scores of people.

These methods provoked considerable anger against the ALP, particularly among Glenquarie residents. Some of those interviewed specifically attacked Labor Premier Bob Carr's statement that the problems in Macquarie Fields had nothing to do with “social disadvantage” but were the product of “hardened criminals”.

Kara Hamilton, a PhD student at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), voted at the Minto Public School. She rejected Liberal and Labor and said she would be voting for Socialist Equality Party candidate Mike Head.

“I don't have all the answers, but I know that Labor and Liberal don't either and that is why I am voting for Mike Head, because I know that if the SEP ever got into power it would do what is right for the ordinary people, which the major parties do not at all.

“I will never vote for a Labor or Liberal candidate; I just won't. I can't stand them. I am sick of the rubbish they spread on the Iraq war. Howard broke international law going in there; the troops should never have gone in there, and they should get the hell out ... I am sick of how both Liberal and Labor grovel to Washington. It's all for Wall Street. Howard has gone in there for Australian big business. There's a lot of money to be made in Iraq, and Bush's mates are making most of it.”

All those opposing Australian involvement in the occupation of Iraq pointed to the US drive for Middle East oil. Maryanne, a UWS law

student, however, was one of the few who attempted to relate this to wider issues. She told the WSWS at the Macquarie Fields public school polling booth: “The war in Iraq is obviously connected to wealth and oil but I think Howard is mainly after political alliances and networking. I think he wants to be the strongman of the Pacific region.”

Macquarie Fields resident Stephen Hanna, who worked in real estate, said: “The war in Iraq is a complete waste of money, manpower and equipment. Why isn't this money being spent on schools, hospitals and housing?”

He also denounced the Howard government's response to the illegal detention and torture of Mamdouh Habib. “Everyone knows he was tortured in Egypt and mistreated in Guantánamo Bay but the Howard government acts like he is a criminal. This is wrong and Labor has said nothing about it. Australian citizenship is worth nothing if the government allows another country to pick you up and do this.”

Glenquarie public housing estate residents spoke with the WSWS at a polling booth in Eucalyptus Drive, the street where the fatal February 25 police car chase that killed Matthew Robertson and Dylan Raywood occurred.

One long-term resident agreed to be interviewed on condition that she remained anonymous for fear of police reprisal. Her concerns are well founded—the NSW state Labor government's police operation in the area involved hundreds of heavily armed riot squad officers, mounted police, the police dog squad and helicopters. The police also bugged an undisclosed number of residents' homes.

She said: “The police are like the politicians—they treat people in this area like dirt. The politicians send in the police and then they come in to slander us and give Macquarie Fields a bad name.

“The police need re-educating on how to approach people like human beings. They should be given anger management classes. When they stop young boys they crack their skulls and put their boots into them. Then they charge them with resisting arrest.

“I have seen coppers pull over young fellows, punch them in the stomach, take the contents of their pockets and drive off. If you complain it does you no good. When I told one group of young lads to complain to the Ombudsman, they asked me: ‘What planet are you living on?’”

Referring to Labor's hostility to the working class, she added: “Carr lives in his own world of champagne and caviar. He should try living in Macquarie Fields for a week. What he is saying about ‘hardened criminals’ is designed to make people rebel. The problems here are poor education, drugs and the way cops approach people. Everything around here is lousy, including the houses and the train system. Instead of bulldozing the houses, which is what they are talking about, they should fix them up and make them decent.”

Hugo Hernades, a retired worker, had read SEP statements and campaign material in the Glenquarie shopping centre and agreed with its analysis. He sharply criticised the police attack on local youth.

“Bob Carr put the cops on the boys here,” he said, “but behind the issue

is the social problem that must be fixed. Even the local council, Campbelltown, which is Labor, does nothing. On health and education, there is not enough help for people in this area and yet Carr wants to take even more facilities off the Campbelltown Hospital.

Commenting on the Labor Party candidate, Hernades said: "I heard Chris Hayes on the Spanish language community radio. He was asked about 10 questions and did not answer any of them. The questions were very good—about education, why Mark Latham quit and so on. Hayes was not interested, only in winning the election. He said nothing about any planning for the community, nothing."

White-collar worker David Camilleri told the WSWs that he was totally opposed to the police operation in Macquarie Fields. He was interstate when the youth riots erupted and tried to follow developments on the radio. "I was shocked when I returned and drove down to the area where the boys were killed to see the situation for myself," he said.

"I was astounded to see so many mounted police and was so diverted that I ran into a traffic island and punctured my tyre. The media has attacked these youth, but a whole number of these so-called hoodlums came to my rescue and helped me change my wheel, even taking me to the garage to help me blow up my spare. They were good Samaritans to me."

One of the problems, he continued, is that there are no jobs or facilities in Macquarie Fields, "just McDonald's, the pub and KFC—commercial outlets to exploit and pump any money they can out of the youth."

Marie, an office worker who lives in Casula, one of the older working class suburbs in the electorate, was particularly concerned about youth unemployment.

"Unemployment in this area, especially among young people is massive," she said. "Even though the Howard government says unemployment has come down, that is not the experience here. There is, at best, only casual work for the young. Those who do manage to have other work are normally working for their families or relatives in some kind of small business."

"Governments, like Howard and Carr, act as if they are deaf. The truth is though they chose to ignore the social problems, because it's their policies that have caused them. They are not prepared to provide funds for programs to assist young people, to provide jobs or give them training."

Two young voters, Michele and Rose, spoke with WSWs reporters at the Minto polling booth. Like hundreds of youth in the area, they were unemployed.

Rose, who trained for childcare, reception and retail, had been unable to find work in the area since leaving school.

Michele, who had been out of work for two years, said the federal government's Centrelink provided no real assistance. "All they do is send you to Mission Employment," she said. "They say here is a job, but if you're not qualified they don't help you get into a TAFE course or whatever. Most companies are not willing to train you. They would rather find someone that is trained. There are shortages of people in childcare, but they are not training people."

Both young women angrily rejected claims by NSW premier Bob Carr that the riots in Macquarie Fields had nothing to do with social conditions.

WSWs reporters also spoke with voters in the high-mortgage private estates of Green Valley, Hinchinbrook and Prestons. Many worked in low-paying temporary and casual jobs with extended hours. Residents in these areas are particularly sensitive to any upward movement in interest rates or other basic expenses.

A young mother with two infant children from Hinchinbrook pointed to some of the problems residents faced: "Child care is a worry for us. There are not enough places and the cost is so high that it is not worth going to work. Long waiting lists for hospitals is also an issue. I've had to wait a couple of years for surgery and that's not something that I want for my kids. The cost of health insurance is spiralling. Health care should be free."

Her husband, who was employed as a steel fixer in the construction industry, said: "In my father's day, one wage was enough to sustain yourself and buy a house. Today, even two wages are not enough to live a comfortable life. I'm on a pretty good wage, and we find it's still not enough. Being a steel fixer is only good money short-term. It's hard on your back, but it's one of the sacrifices you have to make to earn a bit more money."

Irene Christoulakis, who works seven days a week in the food and hospitality industry, is a single parent with three adult children. She pointed to rising private health insurance rates, as another major cost for working class families.

"In the past four years my health insurance has almost doubled," she said, "and what do we get in return? Billions of dollars are being collected but none of this is used to improve the health service. Why can't this be used to establish a decent public health service that everyone can afford to use?"

Stacey, a young school teacher, told WSWs reporters at the Prestons booth that she was concerned about the ongoing attacks on public education.

"As a teacher I see the impact of budget shortfalls," she said. "It took us a year to get a fence around our school and another school where one of my friends teaches doesn't even have a hall. Kids have huge problems and we can't help them. Money is being poured into private schools but poor kids can't even get enough textbooks. You can understand why things like Macquarie Fields happen."

Thao Lor, a 34-year-old taxi driver, said that he worked twelve hours a day, five days a week but that 80 percent of his income went to pay his home mortgage. His wife, who just had a baby two weeks ago, was returning to work because the couple could not afford to lose any of her income. If interest rates increased, he said, he could lose his home.

"I think there has to be new ideas to help the workers," he said. "I didn't believe Howard last year about interest rates not going up. He lies about everything, so I voted Labor, but they're no different. You can't do anything except get on with your life."

Lor's comments were typical of many other voters who are alienated, confused and angry over a range of issues from the war in Iraq to deteriorating economic and social conditions and attacks on democratic rights. The most important response was by a small, but significant layer who in response to the Socialist Equality Party's campaign are seriously considering and discussing a socialist alternative to defend the interests of working people.



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