

Australian voters speak of concerns and discontent

Our correspondents
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to voters outside polling booths in the electorates of Marrickville, Maroubra and Macquarie Fields in last Saturday's by-elections in the Australian state of New South Wales.

Media coverage of the polls was virtually non-existent and the campaigns of all the parties focused deliberately on local issues to the exclusion of any wider political discussion. Nevertheless, those who spoke to the WSWs were concerned, as well as angry and frustrated, over a range of issues that were not addressed by any of the candidates.

Their comments revealed that neither the major parties—Labor and Liberal—nor others such as the Greens have any solid base of support. Few voters expressed their political allegiance strongly for a party, but many declared their hostility toward some or all parties. While many hoped that their votes would make a difference, they had few illusions that the party they voted for would carry out its promises.

Perhaps the most common sentiment was anger at the state Labor government over its attacks on health, education and public transport and a sense that no political party represented ordinary working people. This was apparent in all seats, but particularly so in Macquarie Fields where Nola Fraser, a nurse who had exposed deteriorating conditions in local hospitals, ran as a candidate for Liberals and won significant support.

Dorothy May, a postal worker, declared: "Labor has been so safe in this seat for so long that they really don't do anything. That's why I voted for Nola Fraser. Before that I've voted One Nation or anything because I'm dissatisfied with both of them [Labor and Liberal], so I'll give Nola a go because of that. But no matter who is in government, ordinary people are battling 365 days a year anyway and politicians say whatever they like to get in power."

Lynne, another postal worker, said: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. I think it's all rich people getting what they want, while the poor people, the working class, suffer. The politicians won't listen until they get the same pay packet as an ordinary worker. All they care about is how much money is going into their pockets."

"Nothing has been done [in Macquarie Fields] since the riots [early this year]. The problem is the police and their attitude that the people around here are troublemakers. The real problem is that the young people haven't got any money or anything to do."

Some voters hoped that a state Labor government would offer

some protection against Prime Minister John Howard's federal Liberal-National coalition government and its planned industrial relations laws, but this sentiment was not deeply felt. None of those who voted Labor suggested that the organisation had any solution to the increasing social problems facing workers and their families.

Sharon, a young mother with two children, commented: "I voted for Labor. They're all hopeless, but you have to vote for someone. I've lived in Ingleburn for 30 years and I'm worried about the industrial relations laws, because my husband works for the federal government and I'm worried about his job."

"Nobody's talking about the social issues," she said, "there are no banks here and no services near us, but there's a methadone clinic in Ingleburn, with people queuing up outside and nobody's talking about that."

Domingo, a retired welder and union delegate from Macquarie Fields, said he voted Labor because he was concerned about the rise of right-wing Christian elements inside the Liberal Party.

When asked about the Labor's "anti-terror" laws and its attack on democratic rights, he said: "If the terrorists are against democracy then they're winning because the government is taking away our rights. I come from Spain, which was under a dictatorship—General Franco—and if things keep going like this we will come close to something like that."

Manju Khanna, a teacher in her early 20s, knew little about the candidates but wanted to discuss her family's declining living standards.

"We don't know who the candidates are," she said. "We looked at the media, and the brochures they sent out, and tried to get some idea what they stand for. But whoever gets elected should think about the people. The biggest concern we have is the price of fuel. It's affecting us a lot."

Khanna, whose husband worked at Sydney airport, 45 kilometres from their home, explained: "If you have two cars it is really hard to afford to keep them on the road these days. One of our cars was large and before we sold it, we were spending \$100 a week on it."

"My husband has to go to the airport for work every day. He has to pay the toll, and petrol, and his pay isn't enough. I'm worried about the government's talk of changes to annual leave and salary increases."

Most voters had little confidence in any of the candidates. **Marie Smith**, a disability pensioner from Ingleburn, bluntly declared that

“voting doesn’t get us anywhere” and that “candidates can promise it will rain every night between 10 and 2 but the party will decide.” “It’s all just smoke and mirrors,” she added.

Electoral volatility was particularly apparent among younger voters. Many had not made up their minds whom to support before entering the polling booths.

Rebecca, a young office worker, for example, voted for Nola Fraser, the Liberal candidate, because she wanted to lodge a protest against Labor. Former premier Bob Carr had “stuffed up big time” on transport, water and health, she said.

Nineteen-year-old **Adrianna**, a physiotherapy student who was voting for the first time in the Maroubra by-election, said: “I didn’t know who I was going to vote for, I don’t really follow the media much and so I had a look around at what the candidates were saying when I got here.”

“I chose the Greens,” she said, “because of what they were saying about education. I think the education system could be much improved, particularly public education because I went to a normal Catholic school and I could see the difference when I went to university. The gap between the resources available to students in private education and public education is not fair. Money should not decide how you get educated.”

Opposition to the state Labor government from former ALP supporters was commonplace in Marrickville and Maroubra, where there was a substantial increase in support for the Greens.

Georgio, a retired Telstra worker from Marrickville, said: “I don’t agree with Labor or Liberal” but the state Labor government had been in “too long” and “needed a kick in the pants”. “These people have destroyed thousands of jobs and betrayed us,” he said.

Wayne, a film industry post-production worker from Marrickville, said he had “avoided both the major parties” in recent elections and voted Greens. “I mainly voted Labor in the past, but today there’s no-one I believe in or trust”.

Nick, a 30-year-old worker, “despised Labor” because it had become “very comfortable” and had “too many big business interests.” He said the by-elections would only “make a difference if Labor doesn’t win.” Otherwise it would “only confirm or strengthen the status quo, a victory for the political machine.” If the Greens won in Marrickville, he suggested, although “not much will improve” it would “send a message that they [the Labor machine] cannot take people for granted.”

Roshan, a recently retrenched worker, thought the water supply and industrial relations should have been key issues in the by-elections. She voted for the Socialist Alliance, although she did not expect much from them, and didn’t like the Greens, which she considered a “real middle-class party, with no platform on social justice.”

And the major parties? “They’ve lost the plot,” she said. “Now Labor is all for national security.”

Azar, an accountant from Bangladesh, explained that voters had “no choice, and the only way for them is to follow the system,” or adapt to it.

In contrast to the parochial outlook of all the by-election candidates, he, and many other voters who spoke with WSWS reporters, wanted to discuss a range of issues, including the war in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina.

The war in Iraq, he said, was to further US interests. “All capitalist societies are the same” and the Australian government was “following big capitalist powers” to pursue its interests. People really “cannot expect more from this system,” he said. “The only way is to change this system,” he added.

On Hurricane Katrina he said the “capitalist societies do not bother about the poor people” because “profit, not welfare” dominated and a “few people control all wealth.” People had to organise politically, he said.

Beth, a government worker, who voted Labor, was opposed to the Iraq war. “I don’t support terrorism and I don’t support the war. Look at Iraq now! They were better off when Saddam Hussein was there. Every day 200 people are dying. Kids, innocent people. I don’t support war anywhere. Actually, the weapons of mass destruction claim was not a lie. The United States sold weapons to Saddam Hussein and they used them on Iran. They were all used up back then. So I am against the Howard government on all of this,” she said.

Dee Henderson, a 32-year-old scientist, wanted to discuss the Iraq war. She opposed Labor’s backing for the Howard government’s decision to send Australian troops into Iraq and Afghanistan. “I don’t agree with this at all,” she said. “Why should Australia be sticking its nose in other people’s countries? The money wasted on this should be used in trying to overcome some of the many homegrown problems we have.”

Asked about Labor’s “anti-terror” legislation in NSW, she said: “There is too much power in police hands. Like the war in Iraq, nobody wants these laws but there has been no referendum on them and the politicians don’t listen to the people any more.”

Tony, an engineer, said: “With Labor, they had this semblance of a difference with the Liberals, that they were for the worker, but now even the semblance is gone.”

When the discussion widened to other issues, he commented: “Somehow, when you delve deeper and deeper, there is always a connection. The war on Iraq is costing millions, so it’s going to be creating greater social inequality. These are the hidden agendas and connections that have to be made. And it makes you wonder: is this a deliberate strategy, to confine the election to local issues only?”



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