

Australia: SEP campaign wins support in Victorian state election

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In last Saturday's Victorian state election, Will Marshall, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for the Melbourne seat of Broadmeadows, received 425 votes, or 1.53 percent of the total. While small, the vote nevertheless indicates that the SEP's campaign had a significant impact on workers and young people in the electorate, despite a media blackout, anti-democratic electoral laws and a campaign of just three weeks.

Throughout the election, the SEP stressed its demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and exposed the neo-colonial motives behind the Australian military interventions into East Timor, the Solomon Islands and other Pacific states. It called for the construction of a mass socialist movement against war, social inequality and the systematic erosion of democratic rights and civil liberties.

Most people in the electorate were informed of the SEP campaign through the distribution of over 17,000 copies of the party's election statement. Volunteers placed thousands in letterboxes, while SEP members and supporters distributed hundreds more at shopping centres, schools, railway stations, mosques, the Ford assembly plant and other workplaces. More than 2,000 statements in Turkish were distributed among the large Turkish migrant community in Broadmeadows.

No major newspaper, television or radio station interviewed Marshall or reported his candidacy. In the final week of the campaign, however, Marshall was able to address workers and youth at a well-attended SEP public meeting on November 21; during an interview with the local Northwest 983.9 FM community radio station; and at a forum last Friday sponsored by the Australian Turkish Women's Association.

At the forum, many of the more than 50 women in attendance nodded in agreement as Marshall's review of the SEP's election program was translated into Turkish by one of the association members. Following his address, the SEP candidate answered several questions on the government and media anti-Muslim campaign and regarding deteriorating social conditions in Broadmeadows. His explanation of the SEP's opposition to US and Australian militarism was warmly applauded.

The votes cast for Marshall on Saturday were conscious ones. The SEP candidate was listed last out of the seven names on the ballot paper and, due to the anti-democratic requirement for electoral registration, "Socialist Equality Party" did not appear next to his name.

Votes for the SEP were recorded at all the polling booths located within the electorate. The largest were registered at booths where SEP members and supporters were able to distribute how-to-vote cards and

discuss the party's perspective with voters as they queued to cast their ballot. At Meadow Heights, one of the largest booths in the electorate, Marshall received 100 votes or 2.2 percent of the total. At Bethal, he received 73 votes (3.5 percent); at Broadmeadows North, 71 votes (2.3 percent); at Roxborough Park, a new housing estate, 45 votes (1.7 percent).

Throughout the day, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed voters as they left the polling stations. Contrary to the claims of the media that the majority of people were not interested in politics, voter after voter expressed disaffection arising from a sense that little or nothing could be changed through the major parties. While the majority of working class people voted Labor, they only did so because of a lack of confidence, as yet, in an alternative.

Patricia Bellamy, 58, has lived in Broadmeadows for four decades. She spoke to WSWS at Meadow Heights shortly after she had asked the Labor candidate, state treasurer John Brumby, whether the Labor government was going to honour an election promise to construct a railway station in the area. Brumby ignored the question and turned his back on her.

"He didn't answer me," she said. "I just asked him 'when are you going to give us a railway station?' He couldn't answer me. He's a liar. He will never build a railway station. My son and husband don't want to vote because there's nobody to vote for. I think it's time we got somebody else in, because all Australia's ever had is Liberal or Labor and what are they doing? Forty years ago, the Labor Party promised that we would have a hospital at Broadmeadows, a railway station, and all the things that were supposed to come with it. Forty years on there is no hospital, and there's never been a railway station and I think we are never going to get one."

The campaigns of the major parties and the media coverage reflected their contempt for the sentiments of ordinary people. There was next to no discussion or debate over their agenda or the state of society. Workers and youth, however, have deeply felt concerns over militarism, the deterioration of living standards and working conditions, the growth of racism and the degradation of the environment.

In Broadmeadows—an ethnically diverse community with many migrants from Turkey, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent—there is considerable alarm over the anti-Muslim hysteria that has been promoted by federal and state governments since 2001.

Manoj Mazumder, who migrated from Bangladesh, condemned the government and the media for "spreading fear and uncertainty" about Muslims. "They single out groups like Muslims and present them as a threat. They do this to divide people and get their minds off the war in

Iraq and other problems like jobs. It is Muslims now, but in the past it was other migrant groups such as the Irish.”

Roxanne, a young factory worker, said: “It’s supposed to be a multicultural country, but my boyfriend got spat on because he is black. That has affected him to this day. People say it is a peaceful country but it is not. The media is to blame. Hatred is being created.”

Another woman, Serap Ozbey, recounted that her mother’s elderly friend had been called a “terrorist” and assaulted on a bus because she was wearing a headscarf. “Sometimes I sit down and think that in the future it is going to get worse,” she said.

The week before the election, the Australian High Court upheld the right of the conservative federal government of Prime Minister John Howard to impose its new industrial relations system, WorkChoices, which will see thousands of workers suffer pay cuts and a further deterioration in their working conditions. Labor premier Bracks exploited concerns in the working class to label the election “a referendum” on the IR legislation, while the trade unions called workplace meetings to lecture workers that they had to vote Labor.

Penelope, a public servant in the education department interviewed at Meadow Heights, spoke about the pressure that was exerted during the election: “Bracks is cashing in on the real fear of the new WorkChoice laws brought in by Howard,” she said. “People are being frightened into voting Labor because they are being told the Liberals will cut education and destroy even more public sector jobs. The campaign is entirely negative. I don’t trust either of them and I take everything they say with a large grain of salt.”

However, support for Labor fell in working class electorates despite the fear campaign over the IR legislation. In Broadmeadows, Brumby’s vote dropped from 75.5 percent in 2002 to 68 percent. The Liberal vote also fell, from 15.8 percent in 2002, down to 12.7 percent.

Omar Soueid, a young storeman working over 50 hours a week for an average pay of \$450, articulated the alienation from Labor and Liberal at a booth in Campbellfield. “You get the feeling that in society as a whole, people can’t change anything,” he said. “The rally against the industrial relations laws on 30 November—who’s going to listen to that? As for the elections, the parties suck up to you till the vote is counted, then turn around and do what they were going to do anyway. There is no real choice.”

The vote for the Greens demonstrates that they were not considered an alternative in working class areas. Their vote in Broadmeadows only increased to 6.47 percent from 4.5 percent in 2002. Statewide, the Greens’ vote of 9.35 percent was less than the vote they won in the previous election.

Other third parties and independents received 7.35 percent of the vote state-wide. In Broadmeadows, the right-wing parties Family First and the Citizens Electoral Council both won over 4 percent. A newly-formed populist organisation Peoples Power won 2 percent. The basis upon which people voted for them, however, was generally superficial. In Broadmeadows, a young mother said she had voted for Family First purely on the basis of its name. “I wanted to vote for someone who will do something for families and young people,” she said. A worker said he voted for Peoples Power because its election slogan “said it would clean up politics”.

The largest vote after Labor and Liberal in Broadmeadows and many other working class areas was the informal one, where voters incorrectly fill out or spoil their ballot papers. In Broadmeadows, the informal vote was among the highest in the state, 8.49 percent. Across Victoria, the vote tally indicates that just 81 percent of enrolled voters

cast a ballot, down from over 93 percent in 2002. This suggests that hundreds of thousands of people chose to risk being fined under Australia’s compulsory voting system rather than vote for parties they did not support.

In this atmosphere of anger and confusion, the vote for Will Marshall in Broadmeadows indicates that a small but important layer of workers is moving toward a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Najlah Istifo, an immigrant from Iraq studying business administration, said she had voted for Will Marshall at Broadmeadows North because there needed to be “a voice that says it’s time to stop the war in Iraq”. She said: “I don’t want any more blood and at the moment there is too much blood in my country.” Asked whether she had considered voting Labor she replied: “The problem is that Labor and everybody else only thinks about business. They don’t care about the situation for workers and ordinary people. I want to have a country that is peaceful and where there is equality. This could be a happy country but there needs to be respect for all people, whether it is for Muslims or Christians. Everybody should have equal rights.”

Marg Allgood voted for Marshall and assisted in handing out SEP how-to-vote cards at a booth in Glenroy. She told an interviewer: “The war in Iraq is a mess. I was against it in the first place. I want the troops out but we can’t just then forget about it. People have been bombed, they have no housing, electricity or hospitals. Removing the troops is to recognise that responsibility. In America and here, the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer and there is nothing in the middle. If we can unite people around the world it will be important—it is a global society now.”

Safa Alman, a life-long resident of Broadmeadows and mother of two, also said she had voted for the SEP. “I’m worried about the IR laws and the impact they are going to have on my family and other people that have to work to live. What is going to happen when there are more jobs lost at Fords? We’ve lost thousands of jobs in this area. Ericsson’s has gone and Lanes Biscuits. All the industry is being located to China and other parts of the world where they pay people starvation wages. We are losing public schools and yet the state government is putting funds into private schools. This is really disturbing. What does it mean for the future of my children? Labor is exactly like the Liberals. They talk, but nothing gets changed.”

John Arias, a maintenance fitter, said: “All these governments lie to us. They say whatever they like to get into power and then do the opposite. Do they think we don’t remember? I voted for your candidate because I hope that the socialists will be honest and will fight for us. We have to struggle every day to keep a roof over our heads and pay for an education for our kids. I used to vote Labor, but I’m sick of them. They don’t help us at all. We’ve got to get socialists into the government.”



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