NSW election: Labor government returned despite popular disaffection

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The New South Wales Labor government was re-elected for another four-year term on Saturday, despite widespread hostility towards all the major parties. The result expressed, albeit in a highly distorted manner, mounting popular anger over the Iraq war, attacks on democratic rights, growing social inequality and the far-reaching assault on working and living conditions. While this right-wing and militarist agenda is shared by all the major parties, the Howard government and its state Liberal allies are most closely associated with it. Exploiting the absence of a perceived alternative, Labor won re-election by presenting itself as the "lesser evil", focussing on the opposition's proposals to implement the Howard government's despised WorkChoices legislation and cut 20,000 jobs from the public sector.

Labor received 38.9 percent of the primary vote, compared to 26.8 percent for the Liberals and 10.3 percent for the rural-based National Party. A "swing" of 3 percent was recorded against the Labor government after preferences were allocated, but this was far less than the 12 percent required by the Liberal-National coalition to win government. Labor won 52 of the Legislative Assembly's 93 seats, the Liberals 20, Nationals 13, independents 5, while three other electorates remain in doubt.

Two separate opinion polls published last Friday in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed that more than half of all voters believed that neither Labor nor Liberal deserved to be elected. The Labor government is the most despised state administration in the country, yet the Liberals were unable to make any significant gains. Similar results were witnessed in the Queensland state election in September last year and the Victorian vote last November. The latest result marked the 21st consecutive loss for the Liberals at the state and territory level.

The NSW Labor government has been in office since 1995 and has presided over the ongoing degradation of the public school and health systems. Roads, public transport, water, electricity, and other vital social infrastructure have reached the point of near-collapse. Labor has simultaneously granted massive handouts to favoured property developers, gambling companies, and other big business interests. Social inequality and poverty have increased as a direct result of its right-wing economic policies.

Labor's election campaign was centrally aimed at distancing the government from its own record. Bob Carr, premier from 1995 to August 2005, was deliberately kept out of the media, while Premier Morris Iemma constantly referred to his "18 months in office", as though he had not played a senior role in the Carr-led government. Many Labor parliamentarians distributed election material in which they were described simply as "your local member" and nowhere identified as Labor candidates. Iemma promoted himself as a humble, working class, family man in contrast to the wealthy and elitist Liberal leader Peter Debnam. Like everything else in Labor's campaign, however, Iemma's portrayal as a "man of the people" belied the real record. The Labor premier received his political training under the NSW Right-faction "headkicker" Graham Richardson, and rose through the ranks thanks to his skill at "stacking" Labor branches with paper members.

The Liberals failed to win a single seat from Labor, and gained just two more parliamentary places from independents in the middle-class north Sydney electorates of Manly and Pittwater.

The only seats where Labor suffered significant losses were in working class areas, which the Liberals had no chance of winning.

Labor's vote plummeted in six seats in the Hunter Valley region, an old working class and coal mining area. The anti-Labor vote in the area exposed the growing gulf between the Labor Party and the interests and sentiments of ordinary working people. The Liberals received no benefit from the shift, with the formerly safe Labor seats of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, and Maitland contested by local mayors who ran on "old Labour" social reformist platforms.

While the swing was uneven and in some areas minimal, Labor received a significantly reduced vote in many Sydney working class areas. In the western seats of Macquarie Fields, Smithfield, Granville, and Fairfield, Labor suffered a swing of 11.9, 10.7, 9.0, and 5.4 percent respectively.

In the safe Labor seat of Auburn, also in western Sydney, former Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib stood as an independent candidate and received nearly 1,300 votes or 4 percent of the total. This vote came despite a media blackout of Habib's campaign, demonstrating the depth of popular opposition to the Howard government's agenda of war and militarism as well as the "war on terror".

There is no doubt that while the media now insists that state issues and industrial laws determined the outcome of the NSW election, hatred for the Howard government was a major factor. Every recent opinion poll shows that the government is facing a devastating defeat at the next federal election. A significant political shift is underway, with opposition crystallising around a number of issues including the Iraq war, the incarceration of David Hicks in Guantánamo Bay, and WorkChoices.

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Howard was repeatedly heckled when he stopped for a 15-minute photo opportunity outside one polling booth. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "One man, visibly upset on seeing him, shouted: 'Retire before you get voted out.' Another—who refused to shake the Prime Minister's hand—shouted about the ongoing imprisonment of David Hicks at Guantanamo Bay."

Hostility to the Liberals saw a number of opinion polls published in the week prior to the election predict that Labor could be re-elected with an even larger majority. This was followed by press coverage that was markedly more critical of the Labor government and its campaign. In the final three days, editorials in the *Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Daily Telegraph* advocated a vote for the Liberals. They did so fearing that the stability of the two-party system would be undermined, with the Liberal Party disintegrating if the conservatives suffered yet another rout.

Every newspaper complained that both Labor and Liberal had failed to propose a satisfactory program for big business and the ultra-wealthy, and had instead been marked by mudslinging and negative scare campaigning. "It's hard to envisage a more tired, rotten, arrogant, useless government than this lot," the *Telegraph* complained. "If this [editorial] reads like more an argument against Labor than a rally call for the Liberals, so be it. For that is what it is. In a campaign marked by pathetic slogans, how's this: Liberal. Because it couldn't get any worse."

Corporate donations favoured the Labor Party, which heavily outspent the opposition during the campaign. Official figures are not yet available, but Labor spending was reportedly "substantially higher" than the $11.4 million it spent during the 2003 campaign. "Much of the money comes from those with most to gain from state government decisions, particularly developers, hotel owners and those with gambling interests," the *Australian* reported. "Governments pretend that their influence cannot be bought, which must mean hard-nosed businessmen take temporary leave of their senses before elections."

Having secured re-election, the Labor government is now under pressure to step up the "reform" agenda. Today's editorial in the *Australian Financial Review*, for example, demanded lower business and property taxes, fewer regulations including on occupational health and safety, the privatisation of the state's electricity network, and more infrastructure investment. The Labor Party will willingly accommodate itself to these demands.

Despite posing as an alternative to the major parties, the Greens failed to capitalise on the mounting hostility towards the political establishment. They received almost 9 percent of the primary vote, which was only marginally higher than in 2003, but proved enough to secure a fourth representative in the Legislative Council (upper house). The Greens failed to win a lower house seat, despite hoping to defeat Labor in the inner-west Sydney seats of Marrickville and Balmain. In Marrickville they received 33 percent of the primary vote, and in Balmain 29 percent.

The Greens largely focussed their campaign on climate change and the coal industry, making no attempt to raise the Iraq war or issues involving democratic rights. This silence demonstrated their support for the so-called war on terror and Canberra's neo-colonial operations, particularly in the South Pacific. The Greens also lost support after they cut an unprincipled deal to exchange voting preferences with the Labor Party. While the Greens' manoeuvre was aimed at securing seats in the upper house, they justified it by portraying the Labor Party as a "lesser evil" to the Liberals. Greens' leader Lee Rhiannon even offered to form a "progressive bloc" with Labor.

An equally opportunist perspective was advanced by the protest organisation, Socialist Alliance (SA), which claimed that a re-elected Labor government could be pressured into listening to the demands of ordinary people. They issued their first preference to the Greens and their second to Labor.

The Socialist Equality Party fielded candidates in the state election to provide an independent voice for the working class and a means for fighting against war and militarism, attacks on democratic rights, and mounting social inequality. In the lower house, James Cogan received 625 votes in Heffron, Patrick O'Connor stood in Marrickville and received 175 votes, and Noel Holt stood in Newcastle and received 97 votes. Votes have not yet been counted for those cast "below the line" in the Legislative Council. The SEP's 15-candidate slate, headed by National Secretary Nick Beams, refused to allocate preferences to any other group or party and for this reason was prevented from being listed above the line on the ballot paper.

The SEP's vote, while small, is nevertheless significant. Due to antidemocratic party registration restrictions, our candidates appeared on the ballot without their party affiliation. We also faced a near-complete media blackout. The party nevertheless received a warm and receptive response from workers and youth. An important layer is now deeply hostile to the entire political and media establishment and is looking for an alternative political perspective.

Tens of thousands of the SEP statement "The socialist alternative in the New South Wales state election" were distributed to voters, along with other material from the *World Socialist Web Site*. A series of successful public meetings was held in the electorates and on university campuses, where the SEP campaigned in collaboration with branches of the International Students for Social Equality.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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