

Australia:

## Final votes counted in New South Wales election campaign

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Vote-counting was finalised at Easter for the NSW state election held March 24, showing the Socialist Equality Party received a combined total of 1,201 votes across three lower house electorates and 456 in the Legislative Council.

During a month-long campaign the SEP was the only party to advance a socialist program against militarism and war, social inequality and the growing attack on democratic rights.

While the overall vote for the SEP was small, the strength of the party's campaign lay in its fight for the political education of the working class and its demarcation from all forms of opportunist politics. The SEP opposed attempts by the Greens, Socialist Alliance and a variety of Independents to obstruct discussion on the Iraq war and its far-reaching implications, and to channel mass disaffection back into the two-party system on the basis of claims that Labor constituted a "lesser evil" to the Liberal-National coalition parties.

As a whole, the elections presented the workings of a finely calibrated machine—including state parliament, the NSW Electoral Commission, the major parties and their numerous "left" apologists, along with media editors, reporters and pundits—aimed at the exclusion from public life of the interests and concerns of the working class.

As well as being subject to a near complete media blackout, the SEP had to contend with a vast web of anti-democratic electoral laws designed to block an independent challenge to the two-party duopoly. These included an arbitrary requirement that parties must have 750 members before they can register with the state electoral commission. As a result, the SEP's candidates did not appear on ballot papers under the party name.

There is no question that this affected the voting outcome, particularly in the Legislative Council ballot. Here voters across NSW were denied the opportunity of voting for the SEP unless they knew the candidates' names or the Group letter allocated to the party in the order-of-ballot draw.

Additionally, state electoral laws meant the party's slate of 15 upper house candidates was barred from appearing "above the line". This was because the SEP refused to allocate preferences to any other electoral group. NSW Electoral Commission official Terry Jessop spelt out the undemocratic implications of this regulatory catch-22 as follows: "If you run below the line, you will get very few votes". In other words, the entire voting system is designed to force parties to engage in opportunist horse-trading over the distribution of preferences. If they do not, the price paid for political independence is relegation to the most obscure regions of a Legislative Council ballot paper, the size of a small tablecloth or bath towel.

Party scrutineers who observed the ballot count at two local booths on election night confirmed that due to the complexities associated with "below-the-line" votes, the vast majority were invalid.

In each of the three lower house electorates contested by the SEP, disgust toward the major parties was overwhelming. This sentiment, however, has yet to find an independent political expression. Instead, within the framework of Australia's compulsory voting system, broad sections of the population sought to oppose the pro-market agenda of the Iemma Labor government by voting for independents and Green candidates, or else grudgingly for Labor, simply to keep the Liberal-National coalition parties out.

The SEP received its largest vote—875—in **Heffron**. Our candidate, James Cogan, stood in the same area as the party’s candidate in the 2004 federal elections, and, although the party name was not on the ballot paper, he was known to many voters. He was also opposed by just three other candidates, from Labor, the Liberal Party and Greens.

Many of the votes for Cogan came from Erskineville and Alexandria, home to a large number of university students and young professionals and an area widely canvassed and letterboxed by party supporters during the campaign. Significantly, he received the largest number of votes in Eastlakes, a working class suburb where the SEP has carried out political work for many years.

The SEP received fewer votes—215—in **Marrickville** where its candidate, Patrick O’Connor opposed eight other candidates, including a well-publicised bid by the Greens for a lower house seat. Here a definite chain of command was in evidence: Socialist Alliance functioned as cheerleaders for the Greens, and the Greens supported Labor. Both organisations promoted illusions that Labor could be pressured at the ballot box, and that it represented a “lesser evil” to the Liberals. In line with this, the Greens concluded a preference deal with Labor’s state executive, while Socialist Alliance allocated first preferences to the Greens and second preferences to Labor.

The SEP was the only party that rejected any preference deals and fought for an uncompromising position in relation to the great political questions of the day. While Socialist Alliance and the Greens suppressed discussion on the Iraq war, adapting themselves to the parliamentary framework of “local issues”, the SEP insisted that the eruption of US militarism was the pre-eminent issue confronting the working class. The workers and young people who voted for O’Connor took a highly conscious stand. SEP scrutineers—present for the count on election night—reported that in nearly all cases the ballot papers were marked simply 1 for O’Connor, with voters refusing to allocate preferences to any other party.

In **Newcastle** Noel Holt received 110 votes. In many ways, the election campaign in that electorate revealed, in a highly concentrated manner, the crisis of political perspective confronting workers and young people

everywhere. Holt rejected the parochial and essentially nationalist campaigns of Labor, Greens and a host of local Independents who demagogically promised to deliver “a better deal” for the large working class regional city, some 200 km north of Sydney.

The collapse in support for Labor was apparent. Members of the Carrington branch, one of the oldest branches in the state, resigned en-masse in February after the ALP’s state executive undemocratically swept aside preselection requirements to impose star-recruit Jodie McKay, a media personality, as the party’s candidate. But the anger and hostility of workers was largely channelled behind the campaigns of deposed Labor MP Bryce Gaudry, who contested as an Independent, Newcastle’s Lord Mayor John Tate, and the Greens.

Overall, the NSW election results show a deepening crisis of the two-party system. The Liberals mustered just 26.8 percent of the primary vote, with the subsequent ousting of the party’s leader Peter Debnam doing nothing to abate the party’s decline. The Iemma government retained office with 38.9 percent, despite a statewide 3 percent swing against it, reaching double digits in some working class electorates. With the elections out of the way for another four years, and the state teetering on the brink of recession, the Iemma government will proceed to launch a new round of far-reaching attacks on the living standards of working people.

The primary focus of the SEP’s campaign was not to secure votes, but to prepare workers and young people for the struggles ahead by explaining that the real source of the drive to war, mounting inequality and the assault on democratic rights lay in the capitalist profit system itself, and making clear that the most urgent task was the building of a new mass working class movement, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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