

SEP election campaign in Fowler finds...

Deep disquiet in western Sydney over Australian Labor's leadership coup

An SEP reporting team
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One of the most striking features of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign in the outer south-western Sydney electorate of Fowler for the August 21 federal election has been the hostility that broad layers of people have expressed toward the June 23-24 backroom coup that installed Prime Minister Julia Gillard at the expense of Kevin Rudd.

Fowler extends from major working class heartlands like Liverpool, Cabramatta, Bonnyrigg, Canley Vale, Miller and Mount Pritchard, to newer outlying suburbs such as Hinchinbrook, Green Valley, Middleton Grange and Cecil Hills, where young and immigrant families face severe mortgage and debt stress.

Members and supporters of the SEP are conducting the election campaign throughout the far-flung electorate, discussing the party's socialist analysis and program with working people, young and old, at railway stations, shopping centres, educational colleges, and on doorknocks. The SEP has an election office on Macquarie Street in Liverpool, one of the area's main shopping and transport hubs.

Traditional Labor Party voters have expressed disgust with the events surrounding Rudd's sudden removal, telling SEP candidate for Fowler, Mike Head, that they will "never vote Labor again". Many have expressed appreciation for the SEP's explanation of the driving forces behind the leadership coup that was orchestrated at the direct behest of the mining companies and financial markets, with undoubted backing of the US government, which was concerned, at the very least, by early signs of a possible wavering of commitment to the Afghanistan war.

Since the electorate of Fowler was created in 1984, the Labor Party has treated its voters with increasing contempt. The seat is regarded as one of the safest for Labor in the country and, at the last 2007 election, Fowler had the third largest gap nationally between the Labor vote (67.9 percent) and the Liberal vote (22.8 percent). Two right-wing backbenchers have held the seat between them for 26 years—Ted Grace from 1984 until he retired in 1998, followed by Julia Irwin, an ex-trade union official and Grace's former electorate officer, who is retiring at this election.

As the result of a sordid factional deal, Labor has undemocratically shunted the member from neighbouring Werriwa, ex-union official Chris Hayes, into the electorate as this year's candidate, to make way for long-serving MP, Laurie Ferguson, whose seat was abolished in an electoral redistribution, to take Werriwa. Hayes was plucked out of obscurity in 2005 and slotted into Werriwa after the resignation of his predecessor, ex-party leader Mark Latham. Hayes originally opposed this year's seat-swapping deal, making clear his antipathy to standing in Fowler, but now claims he is "happy" to be there.

Campaigning at Cabramatta railway station, Mike Head met Clansy Edwards, a young public servant from Hinchinbrook. Interviewed later by telephone, Edwards commented: "Gillard's takeover looked like a set-up. It happened overnight, and no one knew it was happening. Obviously, the mining companies were a big part of it. I notice that the miners have not been affected by the latest downturn in the economy. If the mining tax had gone ahead, it would have hit them. It looks like they are a bit powerful."

Edwards, whose family came from Mauritius, said he had always voted Labor, because his parents had. "I'm starting to think on my own now. The miners might as well control the country now. We might as well have a mining executive as prime minister! People vote, but it has no value; it doesn't decide anything. You could call this a 'capitalist democracy'—we have the right to vote but, in the end, the capitalists take over."

Married with a young family, Edwards was also worried about "the way the world's going in terms of war". He pointed to the fact that the US had just sent an aircraft carrier for joint exercises with South Korea, not far from the Chinese coast. "All the countries are getting into position for another war. It's like a giant chess game. China's not too happy about it."

At Liverpool shopping centre, Joan Ryan, a retired hospital linen cleaner from Ashcroft, told the SEP that she was livid about Labor's leadership coup. Later, in a telephone interview, she said she had voted Labor all her life but, "I wouldn't vote for Gillard. I don't trust her. She is manipulating. And keeping troops in Afghanistan 'to the end', like she says, is all wrong. Next, the

government will say that if you want a job, sign up for the army.”

Now on a disability pension, Ryan added: “Gillard has no focus on workers. It’s all about money—cutting the taxes of the miners and the companies. She has nothing to offer us. She didn’t even appreciate the \$30 rise for pensioners. She is not for the pensioners or working man at all. The way they removed Rudd was sadistic. This is democracy! We have no say in anything! We are being dictated to, just like with Hitler.”

Ryan spoke about the difficulties her sons had experienced in finding decent work, and voiced fears about the future for her grandchildren. She poured scorn on the Labor government’s claims that there were “lots of jobs” because the economy had “recovered” from the global financial crisis. “There is no security in jobs anymore,” she said. “Young people don’t get sick leave, holiday pay, long-service leave. My son used to get two or three days a week, and he wouldn’t know if he was coming back the next week or not.”

The former hospital worker commented: “Even the hospitals hire through agencies now. The bosses can do what they want now. People can lose their homes if the boss says: ‘we have to let you go’. When I first came to Australia in 1973, you could walk into a full-time job. Since then, everything has been stripped away from us. No wonder the young are losing interest. They can’t get jobs.”

Fowler, like other western Sydney areas, has among the worst official unemployment rates in Australia: 12.2 percent in Fairfield East, 9.7 percent in Campbelltown north and 7.1 percent in Liverpool east. In June, there were more than 8,000 people receiving unemployment allowances at the Centrelink offices servicing the electorate—3,003 at Fairfield, 3,164 at Liverpool and 1,903 at Cabramatta. Those statistics, however, mask the far greater prevalence of under-employment, with young workers in particular forced to take insecure and sub-standard casual and temporary jobs.

Yesterday morning, at Cabramatta station, other workers expressed hostility to Labor. One utility worker told Mike Head: “Just to kick out Rudd was wrong. Whatever you think of him, he was elected by the people. He was entitled to serve a full term. If he was going to be put out, it should have been by the people at the next election.”

Asked why he thought Gillard has been installed, the utility worker commented: “I think the so-called ‘big new tax’ was behind it. It’s funny that all this happened just as this tax was going through. The money men pulled all the strings—especially the ones in [Labor’s] caucus!” As he turned to run for his train, he added: “The big issue is that we are paying through the nose for everything, and that’s got to stop.”

As these comments illustrate, there has been a significant shift in public sentiment since 2007, when the vast majority of working people nationally voted for Labor in the hope that a Rudd

government would be a “lesser evil” than the hated Howard Liberal government. Rudd’s ousting has accentuated the disillusionment produced by Labor’s seamless continuation of Howard’s policies, including the war in Afghanistan, attacks on workers’ rights and conditions, and the escalating cost of living.

Fowler is an extraordinarily cosmopolitan electorate, and home to many immigrants and former refugees—not just in Cabramatta, which has a substantial Vietnamese population, but throughout the new suburbs that have been built in the past several years. The electorate, in fact, has the highest proportion of residents born overseas (48.9 percent), born in a non-English-speaking country (46.3 percent) and who speak a language other than English at home (64.9 percent).

Throughout these suburbs there is a growing awareness that both the Labor government and the Liberal opposition are trying to distract attention away from worsening living conditions and the deteriorating state of public education, health and transport, by whipping up fear campaigns about immigrants and refugees. Among some recent arrivals, including Maoris and Pacific Islanders, there are fears that they may be forced to leave the country before long.

On a doorknock in Green Valley, Head had a discussion with a Qantas airport terminal worker who emigrated from India a decade ago. “I have been in Australia for 10 years now, and things have only gotten worse,” he said. “Our bills keep going up—for electricity, water, gas and everything—but my wage doesn’t. There is a lot more casual work, and it is much harder to get permanency. I am permanent now, working shifts, but I have been through Centrelink so many times, and all the ‘work tests’ they put you through.” He was distrustful but puzzled by Rudd’s removal. “Gillard is too smooth. I voted for Rudd three years ago, and I don’t understand why he was removed,” he said.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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